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MR. JOHN STROOD

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

MR. BAILEY-MARTIN

THE WEST END

PARK LANE

THE SYSTEM

THE PATIENT MAN

ETC. ETC.

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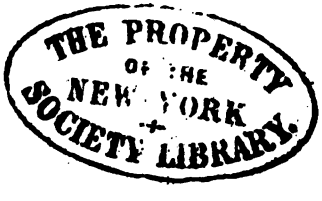

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MR. JOHN STROOD

CHAPTER I

SINCE I commenced this biography many things have happened. It was intended to be published after the death of him whom I have here identified by the name of Lawrence Rivers. Rivers, however, is unfortunately still alive. I say 'unfortunately' advisedly, since the fact that he is still living prevents me from doing complete justice to his memory under his own name. The thing could not be done without libelling a whole community—including his wife!

But let not the public misjudge me. I think there can be little doubt that although the ill-natured may describe my work as a labour of spite, the judicious will see that it is a labour of love. But why should I care? If mean minds pursue me with their malice, my defence will show how highly I was once esteemed by the great man who cannot even now afford to ignore my existence. Has not the single-hearted friend who appreciated him most the highest claim to honour his memory? No doubt my enemies (they comprise the whole ignoble army of ignorant critics) will abuse me, and pretend that these pages were written with the object of gaining notoriety and exaggerating my personal influence over one of

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the most original minds of our time, but for this I am prepared.

After this preface I will tell my story as simply as I can, leaving my own reputation for honesty of purpose to the candour of the future. Lawrence Rivers was himself at one time a lover of truth—'of truth,' as he said, 'at any price.' I think my readers will admit that I have not feared to pay it here!

But, Lawrence, if you found the world's shield of dullness too thick even for your keen spear, in spite of high hopes and dauntless courage, what victory dare I expect from my feebler attack?

Some French critic has said that England was the least favourable birthplace for genius, an opinion the originality of my own talent compels me to share. The soil is too cold, the atmosphere too grey, for us to attain fullest growth. In matters of no moment, in our exaggeration of trifles, we are original enough, but in dealing with the graver questions of the national life, as a people we have become the least intellectually active in Europe. There is a delicate quality which the keen observer misses in our life, and especially in the air breathed by politicians, the absence of which invites atrophy. Is it because we exhausted in the long struggle which made us great the spirit of self-sacrifice and noble deeds? This at least was the dread oppressing Lawrence Rivers before the women succeeded in spoiling him. Once it was the aim of all he did and said, and of most that he wrote, to stir 'the slumbering sparks in the fat conscience of his country.' Unluckily in his note, clear and beautiful as it was, there was too much of the lark and linnet to rouse a people capable only of hearing the big drum. Thus it soon became plain

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to me who most closely watched him that Rivers could only become a vital force if he enjoyed the support of my own practical mind. Of this at one time he seemed to see the necessity, but a spirit of mischief intervened, and all my influence has been obliterated by a woman. It is this fact that makes the present justification of myself the most generous ever planned.

The weight of the dull British world lay heavily on the House of Rivers. A swan in a grey-goose's nest was no more out of place than young Lawrence in Beckstone Park. What strange caprices of heredity gave the boy such a father as the Squire of Beckstone? I never knew Lawrence's mother. She died when he was a child. From her he inherited his beauty. A lady of mixed Irish and Welsh ancestry, famous for her wit and loveliness, her untimely death at Verona from typhoid fever just before her husband commenced proceedings for divorce, spared two families what threatened to be one of the scandals of the period. Lord Terncliffe died ten years later, and there are now few who know what sorrows or passionate temptations induced the charming and high-spirited lady to leave the burly Squire of Beckstone and join her lover in Italy. Whether Lawrence ever knew them I have always doubted. Certainly he never spoke of them. Once, however, in the big dining-room at Beckstone, where portraits of the Squire and his wife faced each other in the quiet light stealing in from the western sky through the deep-set stone-faced windows, he turned to me and said, 'How could such a pair possibly be happy together, Strood? Look at my father's chin and my mother's eyes!'

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I followed his glance. The chin was the chin of resolute dullness—blunt and British. It was the face of a man with all he wanted without the discipline of the fight to acquire it. The stolid aggressive attitude seemed to say 'I 'm Squire of Beckstone! who the deuce are you?' Then I crossed the room and studied the features of the lady. The artist—Sprigg, R.A.—in spite of the conventional treatment popular at the time, has caught something of the lady's nature. The wonderful eyes still shine with the wistfulness of the woman's unsatisfied dream. That so much youthful beauty had been quenched sadly, swiftly, inevitably, as the wave of a scandal was breaking over it, called from me an involuntary sigh.

'It wasn't painted for my father,' continued Rivers, 'but for another man whose brother gave it to me.'

Then he turned away and walked quickly to the library, leaving me wondering before his mother's portrait. The fingers of chance sometimes open windows through which we glance momentarily into the mystery of other lives. The Squire's dogged face, the wife's wistful loveliness, all acquired new meaning. The unseen forces of the world are always working about us, moulding what is to come out of the results of the years which have gone by; of these Lawrence was one of the subtlest products. Outside the summer wind was stirring the boughs of the great cedars; I was conscious of breathing an atmosphere which had helped to mould generations of Riverses. Here, nine hundred years ago, a Norman king had granted an obscure mercenary soldier some acres of ground, and from that dim transaction had sprung the family of which Lawrence

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is the last representative. I seemed to touch the fringe of romance. Throughout the long series of vicissitudes, the confusion of civil wars, the still deadlier rivalries of conflicting religious strife, this family had clung to its own whilst hundreds of more famous names had been engulfed. To what peculiar aptitude was this due? Must the answer be sought in the stubborn chin of the 'Squire of Beckstone,' or in the dazzling gifts of his son? Lawrence himself, I knew, had I questioned him, would have replied, 'Political cunning, organised selfishness, and the absence of conviction are the main causes of family permanence. The noblest souls founded no families.'

I recall these thoughts, and the sudden sense of illumination accompanying them, because it was then that I began taking always mental and sometimes written notes with the object of writing Lawrence's life. Little did I imagine then the nature of the vindication I should be compelled to give to the world! It was Lawrence's misfortune to underrate my value when we worked together, and to disregard my criticism when the influence of a beautiful but unscrupulous woman drove me from his side! But such is the rectitude of my mind and my devotion to truth, that no one living is capable of doing justice to either of them except myself. I am not one of those who, gazing into the mean pools of self, see a Narcissus, but one who watches his fellowmen with the dauntless eye of a social philosopher.

Once in the library at Beckstone, as I stood before the shelves reading the titles of the books and gossiping carelessly, Rivers told me that I possessed a singular capacity for transmitting rays received

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from other minds and preventing them from being lost in space. These words deeply gratified me at the time. May they be accepted here as an excuse for the literary imperfections which the veiled nature of this biography renders inevitable.

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CHAPTER II

My own affairs are of importance in the present work so far only as they touch the interests of Lawrence Rivers, and I shall endeavour to obtrude as little as possible. The Strood family had been associated as solicitors with the Beckstone estates for three generations. My grandfather was senior partner in the firm of Strood, Muirhead and King of Lincoln's Inn Fields. My father, unfortunately, exhibited marked distaste for the one profession in which a lucrative practice had been prepared for him. Naturally the other partners welcomed the opportunity of buying him out. The sale of his birthright started him in life with something more than a competency.

My stepmother (my mother died when I was four years old) was a lady of high spirit and strong will; my father, a man of amiable but irresolute character. To gratify his second wife's social ambition, which, in craving for fashionable life, surpassed her reasonable claims, he set up in Mayfair on an income that at most permitted solid respectability in South Kensington, an establishment several degrees beyond the range of his inelastic fortunes.

One consequence of this was that I was prevented from renewing at Oxford the intimacy with Lawrence Rivers which commenced at Archester. For this

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wasted golden opportunity, kindly and forgiving as I am, I have never been able to pardon my stepmother. Whilst nothing has been too good for my two half-brothers Charles and Henry (we are no longer on speaking terms), the second best was deemed good enough for me. Indeed, had it not been for what my stepmother, with singular want of taste, described as 'the patronage of the family at Beckstone Park,' I might have foregone the education of a gentleman. But the Squire was my godfather—he stood for me (by proxy) at the request of my grandfather; and fourteen years later, after some importunities on the part of my stepmother, got me into the famous school at Archester on the foundation.

Lawrence Rivers and I went to Archester in the same term, and it was there that I first fell under the strange fascination of his character. As unlike the ordinary British boy as a swallow to a sparrow, outside the little rebellious circle of which he was the natural leader, he was as misunderstood in the school as he afterwards became in the world.

But for the indulgence of Dr. Smiles, young Rivers's associations with the school would have been soon cut short. Luckily a brilliant translation into Latin hexameters of 'Young Lochinvar' brought the new pupil under the headmaster's notice in his first term. 'I decided,' said the Doctor to me years afterwards, 'to keep my eyes on the boy, especially as I guessed he was one of the rare lads for whom a public school is supposed to be unsuited. What a fortunate thing it was that he was in my house!'

Even at this early age Rivers was on the lookout for abuses to reform, and for tyrannies to defy. On the subject of enforced games he addressed to Dr. Smiles a letter which that enlightened man admitted

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'astonished' him. 'It was,' he told me, 'the most convincing plea for the schoolboy right to dispose of his own leisure ever written, and I shall always regret that Mrs. Smiles, to whom I was rash enough to show it, carried it into the nursery, where the maid used it to light the fire!'

This letter was the first event in Rivers's career which I noted in writing. How greatly I regret (for I took my tone from those about me) the want of sympathy in the boyish comment! 'Rivers had the cheek to write to the headmaster to say he's dashed if he's going to play games if he doesn't want to!' A few days later, in the same little book, I come on the following entry: 'Lawrence is neither to be sacked nor whacked. Fellows rather sick.' These words at least prove how strongly the opinion of the school was opposed to the champion of its liberties.

Luckily for his future reputation, the headmaster was capable of making the necessary allowance for so exceptional a case. Dr. Smiles invited young Rivers into his study, where the interview had the result which the school least expected.

'I perceived,' said the Doctor to me in later years, 'that I had to deal with a boy ill-suited to the enforced discipline of the nets, so I sacrificed the nets, though the whole school was against me.'

'And the school went in for cricket with renewed ferocity in consequence,' I replied. 'It was the only year we beat Dugly!'

The Doctor sipped his port, glanced at me across the table, and said: 'Strood! although you weren't over-brilliant as a boy, you never missed what was going on. Do you happen to know what dear Rivers said at the time?'

'I can't recall his actual words,' I answered, 'but

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they were to the effect that even the most hide-bound prejudices may be shrivelled up in the fire of Reason—for at that time "Reason" with a big R was the shrine at which Rivers worshipped.' The Doctor's large scholastic face showed faint traces of annoyance, for he believed that he and Archester had 'formed' Rivers. The good man might as well have tried to form a cloud!

'Whatever men may say of you, Strood,' returned the headmaster, 'they can't call you a flatterer. But I had hoped Rivers did me greater justice.'

'Certainly you had his respect, sir. He always said no one was better fitted than yourself to administer an obsolete and dull system of education. An observation in which a very subtle compliment is embodied.'

'Is it indeed, Strood? I'm glad you can see it, because I can't. I wish I could have done more for Rivers, but when he left Archester and went to Oxford he got into clumsier hands than mine, and with deplorable results. He was unlucky, too, in his father. If he had been in my place, the tough old Squire told me, he would have caned his son to the cricket nets! No wonder they didn't get on.'

But it is unnecessary for me to tell the story of Lawrence Rivers's schooldays. In the first place, it could not be done without seriously reflecting on my old school as an institution for training the youth of the upper classes, nor, in the second place, without disrespect to the late headmaster, who is himself devoting his leisure to a little book in which, under the title of *Archester Days*, an account will be given of his relations with a pupil whose talents he flatters himself he first perceived! In that

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strange poem, 'Caged Spirits,' published in Rivers's first book of verse, the boy's school impressions are revealed. That the place stimulated him little and annoyed him much is made clear, but in spite of this, Rivers looked back on his schooldays without bitterness, although more or less in conflict with its conventions throughout the five years that he spent within its solemn grey walls.

Once, when I reminded him how deeply indebted English public life was to our great schools for the culture, self-restraint, and sanity imbibed at these liberal sources, he laughed and said, '*Locutus est bos!* Spoken like a true Archestrian, Strood! Certainly let us do honour to the school for teaching us the right sort of dullness! Was it not at Archester that you learned to prefer what you mistake for manner to mind? O solid product of a sound educational system that helped to make cricket a science and literature ridiculous, what would our enlightened and polished society be without you! Certainly, Strood, we are ungrateful wretches! At Archester we learned to be prigs without knowing it. Archester spared us the anguish of seeing ourselves as we really are. What greater achievement can we ask of it than that? Thanks to Archester, we have driven out nature and substituted "tone," Strood, and know how to appraise the solemn British trifles at their local market value.'

Then Lawrence glanced at me with the little glint which shone in his eyes whenever he was annoyed, for in moments of irritation he did not spare even me if by accident I exhibited any excess of that British self-complacency of which he was so intolerant.

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CHAPTER III

OF Rivers's singular career at the University I was only indirectly a witness. Having never enjoyed the advantages which I believe the ancient seats of learning offer to an intelligent and ambitious youth, I am perhaps unable to fully appreciate the nature of my friend's offence. When he 'went up' (I believe that is the correct phrase), the misunderstanding with his father—the character of which I have endeavoured to explain in the proper place, so far as it seems explicable—had already commenced. Lawrence's respect for his mother's memory was touching in its warmth. This feeling, rather than resentment at any vulgar departure from the paths of rectitude on his father's side, hardened his heart. Still, on the whole, young Rivers seems to have been happy enough at the University. Certainly his last term there was full of the 'joys of battle.'

He was guilty of 'a blazing indiscretion,' if we measure him by the standard applied to the average undergraduate who regulates his life with an eye to his future advancement, but, on the other hand, his generous audacity in the case of Sir Louis Finck showed that he regarded no sacrifice too great when a moral principle was at stake.

Sir Louis had built and endowed the excellent college on the Huddlestone Hills that bears his

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name. In consequence of this and, it was whispered at the time, of gentle pressure from an exalted quarter, it was decided to bestow an honorary degree on this public benefactor.

It was held in the City at the time, however, that the University was a little indiscreet in its selection of such a candidate. As a financier, Sir Louis's methods were open to criticism. This the most superficial examination of the methods which he employed to attain wealth strongly suggests.

The 'Easy Loan and Secret Advance Association' of which he was the inventor, combined an ingenious system of pawnbroking with unlimited usury. It is true that Sir Louis had no connection with it when its dealings became a public scandal, but it had been the chief source of his income up to the hour of his withdrawal. Then there was the 'Matador Meat Juice Company,' from which, for some obscure reason, he received £20,000 before retiring from the managing directorship. The company still exists, but I would willingly sell my five hundred one-pound shares at half-a-crown if I could find a purchaser! The 'Beagle Brand Powder,' of which Sir Lewis was the actual though not the nominal proprietor, no doubt does nearly all advertisement claims for it. It removes stains from silks and most other fabrics, cleans brass-work and restores paint, and is 'invaluable' in families unpractised in the uses of the dinner-napkin. Sir Louis bought the patent rights for £250 of Hermann Kooler, the inventor, who died in poverty in Islington last winter. How many thousands Sir Louis made out of 'Beagle Brand' the governing board of his school (which includes the Dean of Rivers's old college) are perhaps in a

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position to say. But of this I am certain: before Rivers commenced his agitation against the conferring of an honorary degree on Sir Louis Finck, he had become acquainted with the unpublished side of that able man's career.

'At Oxford I only did one thing of which I'm proud,' Rivers said to me. 'I prevented the University from bestowing an honorary cap and gown on a rogue.'

In days when names on company prospectuses carried more prestige than they now confer, the Squire of Beckstone was not too proud to make a financial use of his. Moreover, he was carefully protected by his lawyers as well as assisted by a certain bucolic craft which steered him clear of serious risks. Sir Louis Finck had met the elder Rivers at a public dinner, and had found little difficulty in winning the Squire's favour. The result of this was that the name 'Lawrence Nelson Rivers of Beckstone Park' decorated the prospectus of the 'Beagle Brand Powder Company, Limited,' which first exploited that ingenious stain-eraser.

Sir Louis Finck and his affairs would have had no interest for Lawrence Rivers, had it not been for the woman whose influence perhaps deflected from its natural course the earlier part of the young man's career. At the age of twenty Lawrence fell passionately in love with Diana Leighton.

Mrs. Leighton's brother, Henry Read, was senior scholar at Lawrence's college, and it was through him that they first met. Read was son of a Captain Read who, having abandoned the Army for the Stock Exchange, had in a few years got rid of nearly all his capital. Captain Read attributed his financial

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misfortunes to the 'Matador Meat Juice Company,' into which he declares Finck tempted him just before he (Finck) 'wrecked the whole concern by plundering it to the extent of £20,000.' I am quoting the indignant officer's words and cannot vouch for their accuracy. Captain Read's only daughter, Diana, was wife of William Leighton, a man of considerable wealth—one of the great banking Leightons, I believe, although that much respected firm were not anxious to advertise the connection, especially after buying their relation out. The marriage was an unhappy one. Leighton's wife said he was imperfectly sane, his enemies described him as 'a brute.' I only saw Leighton once. It was at a race-meeting. He was a big burly man with dull heavy eyes, clean-shaven red cheeks, and loose thick lips. He was driving a smart four-in-hand on which were perched three rowdy young men and four over-dressed and over-rouged ladies, the most flamboyant of whom, Asphodella or Della St. Claire, was reported to be doing her utmost to console him for the wife from whom he was separated. In fact, Bill Leighton—he was known in every bar between Piccadilly and Charing Cross as 'Bill'—was disreputable. He cared less for the opinion of society than for the approval of the bar-tenders and betting men, who (justly, I believe) respected him for his sporting shrewdness. 'Bill' was a sort of hero with the public which takes its culture from certain pink sporting-papers—a reputation which amply recompensed him for the loss of his family's esteem and his wife's affection. The world naturally wondered why Mrs. Leighton did not seek that complete freedom from her husband

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that his conduct suggested was so easily attainable. On this I can throw no light. Delicacy naturally forbade me questioning Lawrence, but I may say (I trust without offence, since I am desirous, above all, to be impartial) that it was rumoured in Bill Leighton's circle that there were certain obstacles against this course, and that Bill, referring to this incomplete shattering of his domestic happiness, had once been heard to say, 'Diana will let sleeping dogs lie. She 's no fool!' There may have been another reason. The Leightons had a daughter, and it is possible this ill-matched couple may have avoided the divorce court out of consideration for the child.

It was Diana Leighton's influence which started Lawrence Rivers on his agitation against Sir Louis Finck.

'The public and, I trust, the University,' said Rivers, 'only knew Sir Louis through the Finck College on the Huddlestone Hills. I determined to let them see him as he is revealed by the "Easy Loan Association" and "Matador Meat Juice."'

Young Read and Lawrence Rivers in the long vacation went to Switzerland together, where they were joined by Mrs. Leighton, her maid, and little girl. The lady was eight years Lawrence's senior, but she was apparently as deeply attracted by the wonderful youth as he was by her. The scattered fragments of Rivers's diary which I was permitted to see throw a strong light on the dangerous world the inspired undergraduate and beautiful woman of the world tried to enter together.

'The first time I saw Diana Leighton,' Rivers said, for he concealed nothing from me when the mood

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was on him, 'stands out as the most vivid moment of my life. She was walking across a green mountain meadow from the hotel. Her brother and I were coming up from the valley to join her. The whole thing comes back to me with a flash; the background of pineclad mountains, the foam of the waterfall seen through the break of the trees, the blue sky covered with moving islands of white cloud, and the centre of this world, so remote from the vulgar confusion of human existence, this lovely lady. She was carrying her hat in her hand; the sun shone on her hair, and the summer light floated in her wonderful eyes. She smiled down on us, I remember—an unforgetable smile, full of that strange message which no poet ever interpreted—and when Read said, "Let me introduce my friend, Lawrence Rivers," I was struck with a sort of dumb amazement. It was one of those rare moments when the spirit rises to its fullest joy but knows it not because the greedy body claims its own material share.'

From this ecstasy Lawrence apparently hurried swiftly to intimate relations with the lady. They were six weeks together in Switzerland. He became her knight-errant, and prepared to slay dragons to win his dear lady's favour. His attack on Sir Louis Finck was his first exploit. At this point Captain Read's influence made itself felt. Now the Captain was a man of the world who, having been knocked down and trampled on in the struggle to get rich, was nursing his bruises and feeding his angry and jealous soul on the bitter herbs of humiliation. Read had two hatreds. He hated his son-in-law Bill Leighton, and I am afraid that if he could have dropped rat's-bane into Sir Louis Finck's whisky

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and potash, he would not have hesitated to commit the crime. It may be that he saw in Lawrence Rivers a means for gratifying both his passions. As heir to Beckstone Park, Lawrence was at least an attractive son-in-law. It may be that Captain Read, seeing the lad's passion for his daughter, contemplated some matrimonial readjustments. There is reason to believe that Leighton—'Bully Bill,' his father-in-law used to call him—was approached on the subject, and that he replied, 'Not my game, Gov'nor! who breaks, pays, you know.' But if there were such subterranean negotiations, they led to nothing.

Captain Read joined the party with the view, I suspect, of safeguarding his daughter's interests. A failure on the Stock Exchange may yet be a crafty man of the world. Young Rivers represented a side of social life naturally much respected by Mrs. Leighton's father. Certainly he made no effort to conceal his feelings from the young man. He deplored his daughter's unhappy marriage, abused his son-in-law, cursed the man to whose financial stratagems he attributed his ruin, till he became in the inexperienced eyes of Rivers the victim of a cruel wrong. Behind this spur was the lady's voice. Young Read admitted that his sister had married that 'beast Leighton' to escape the poverty which, after his father's bankruptcy, descended on his family. Thus by a simple process of reasoning common to lovers, Lawrence Rivers could attribute the loss of the woman he otherwise might have married to the company-promoting craft of her father's enemy. At the same time Rivers learned with the rest of the world that this eminent financial authority and

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enthusiast in the cause of education, on whom the honour of knighthood had just been conferred, was one of the illustrious men whom the University had selected for special honour. I met Rivers in London just before he returned to college. He was full of indignation and contempt. The Old Bailey, he said, was the only British institution fit to do justice to the founder of the Finck College. Something must be done to prevent the University from disgracing itself.

With this object Rivers set to work at once. Assisted by Captain Read's knowledge of Sir Louis Finck's methods of business, but far more by his own extraordinary capacity for mastering the details of any subject in which he was interested, young Rivers undertook to prove that the successful financier was a person to whom no self-respecting body of men could do honour. Whether he was temperate in his conduct or sufficiently respectful towards those placed in authority over him, is a question on which critics will continue to differ, but of the effectiveness of the agitation of which Rivers was the driving force there can be no doubt. As the work of a rebellious undergraduate it has never been equalled. Unfortunately, neither at the University nor beyond its walls was justice done to the purity of his motives. The agitation was for the most part regarded as a great joke, and the achievement classed in the popular imagination with that of 'The Man who broke the Bank at Monte Carlo.'

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CHAPTER IV

ALL this time I had been a deeply interested spectator of the events which involved the interests of the House of Rivers, from my chair as a junior clerk in the office of the Ways and Means Department. In this branch of the Administration a nomination (due to the Squire of Beckstone), accompanied by a searching examination in the various branches of a liberal education (including the Higher Mathematics), had secured me a place. But think of the contrast! Whilst I was adding up columns of figures, or drafting official letters all in the same odious phraseology, young Rivers was leading an agitation which filled the papers with his name, and disturbed the solemn complacency of an ancient seat of learning.

Rivers commenced by adopting the methods common to extra-university politics. He first put the case before as many kindred spirits as the colleges, the clubs, and debating societies could produce. Supported by idle and mischievous undergraduates whose chief delight is to vex all those set in academic authority over them, these formed a considerable band, and included earnest freshmen of radical views. A meeting out of college was held, at which the following motion was passed: 'This meeting is of opinion that, in spite of the college

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which he has built and endowed, Sir Louis Finck's reputation as a financier totally unfits him for the honour with which it is alleged this University intends to reward him. It further desires and empowers Mr. Lawrence Rivers to bring this view before the proper authorities with the object of avoiding a public scandal.'

It chanced at this time that I had already had some frail connection with journalism. A man in our office, Horace Dabbs, acted as a sort of dramatic critic for the *St. Stephens Herald*—an evening journal in its brief day accounted of importance by young men who earned their living in Government offices, and even by their seniors more or less in touch with the higher official world beyond.

The report of this meeting struck Harold Syme, the editor, as 'good copy.' An undergraduate agitation was a novelty, and the *Herald* was in search of a new sensation. Syme, moreover, had lost money in the 'Matador Meat Juice Company,' and his nature was not forgiving. He not only printed a full account of the meeting, including the indictment of Sir Louis's financial methods contained in Rivers's speech, but further supported it by a sarcastic leading article entitled, 'In all Days of our Wealth.'

Stirred by this a Radical organ of opinion of wide circulation, much dreaded by officials on account of its skill as a grievance hunter, sent a reporter to interview young Rivers, who expressed himself in fearless terms—venturing, however, to hope that the University authorities were sinning rather through ignorance than malevolence, and that they might even yet recognise their blunder by rejecting their unworthy candidate before becoming completely

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compromised! This gibe stung. The dons stiffened their backs, and decided to damp down the agitation under the weight of an Olympian silence. The excitement now was great. The Ajax of St. Bede's was defying the lightning! An undergraduate had pitted himself against the Powers! The results of the interview between Rivers and the head of his college were awaited with breathless interest. It was inconclusive.

Dr. Roache not only refused to discuss Sir Louis's fitness for university honours, but reminded the young man that it was for him to accept the rules of his college, and not to worry the already greatly overtaxed authorities into revoking its decisions by a rebellious and unseemly agitation. 'I trust, Mr. Rivers,' he added, 'that we may hear no more of this nonsense, for it would be a matter of regret if a taste for mischief cut short your connection with the University. So far we have taken the most lenient view we can. I trust you will not compel me to send you down to think over my advice.'

But for such a policy as this it was now too late. The hole-and-corner undergraduate meeting which otherwise the dons might have dealt with as an ordinary exhibition of youthful mischief, had been magnified into a question involving moral principles by the intervention of the sensational papers. Perceiving this, Rivers, for the moment, accepted the rebuke in silence—it was, he told me, easier to carry on the agitation in college—and wrote his 'Open Letter to Sir Louis Finck.' This masterpiece of irony—urging the financier to have no dealings with an institution endowed with such inadequate respect

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for wealth, and to reject with scorn its valueless degrees—was signed 'L. R.,' and published in the *St. Stephens Herald.* Read all over the University with amusement, its authorship was of course no secret. Moreover, it chanced at this time that another side of Lawrence Rivers's mind had made itself manifest.

The *Three Kingdoms' Review*, then at the height of its fame under the editorship of Macshane, published a very beautiful poem signed 'L. R.,' entitled 'The Mountain Side,' and dedicated to 'D. L.' As a rule the publication of a poem makes no more stir than the fall of a leaf. 'The Mountain Side,' however, was praised by the most revered of living writers, who, in a letter addressed to Macshane asking for the author's name, declared that no one but a real lover and a true poet could attain such lyrical height. Macshane supplied the name, Lawrence received a charming note from the old poet, of whom we then all spoke as 'The Master.' This note, deeply to Rivers's annoyance, found its way into the newspapers. Shown in confidence to a few of his intimate friends, it was copied by Cecil Dabbs (nephew of the man in my office), and by him sold to a newspaper.

The following paragraph, found by me among Rivers's papers, is the only press-cutting that he seems to have preserved. 'It is not a little singular that the initials "L. R." attached to the verses so warmly praised by the oldest of our living poets, should be those of Mr. Lawrence Rivers, the undergraduate at St. Bede's College, Oxford, responsible for "An open letter to Sir Louis Finck," in the *St. Stephens Herald.* Our readers, especially those

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who study our "University Intelligence," will not be surprised to hear that they identify one and the same man.'

Among the little group of men at the University interested in modern literature, the poem published in Macshane's review (Macshane was a former Fellow of Bruce College) had been much admired. When, therefore, it became known that the moving spirit in the Anti-Finck agitation was the author of it, Rivers for a short time was a man of even greater note than Byles the Triple Blue. His portrait was exhibited in the shop windows and purchased by admiring freshmen to send to their sisters.

Meanwhile, however, the successful financier around whose personality the controversy raged had not been idle. He began by appealing to Rivers senior, whom the rumour of this agitation had not reached. The Squire was several thousand pounds richer than he would have been had not Sir Louis placed him on the directorate of the 'Beagle Brand Powder,' and afterwards bought out his interests at their enhanced value. In consequence of these business relations he held Sir Louis in high esteem as a man of character and sterling honesty with whom he had interchanged hospitalities. When, therefore, he heard of his son's attack on his friend his wrath was great. His first step—he was in London at the time—was to send for me. I called at his hotel.

'What do you know of all this "tomfoolery," Strood?' he asked grimly. He looked burlier than ever. Anger added a shade of truculence to the heaviness of his face. On the table before him lay an open letter, several marked copies of newspapers,

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and the number of Macshane's review containing Lawrence's poem. Apparently some one had collected for him this evidence for his son's conviction.

'Only what I have seen in the papers, sir,' I replied respectfully.

'Did you know he had been put on to this by a woman—a woman separated from her husband—with whom the young fool has got entangled?'

'Of course, sir,' I replied, with some hesitation, 'I knew Lawrence entertained feelings of respect for Mrs. Leighton.'

'Respect be damned, Strood!' retorted the Squire. 'Nice sort of respect! I'd rather see him sitting with her on a bench in Hyde Park on Sunday with his arm round her waist! It would be less indecent than making love to her in rhyme in a magazine and then writing to the papers to say how cleverly he has done it!'

The Squire was interpreting the facts as so much food for his wrath. In such moods he was beyond reach of argument, so, saying nothing, I looked as intelligently sympathetic as I could.

'But that's not the worst,' he went on. 'Fellows who scribble poetry always get into a mess with loose women, but what the deuce does he mean by going out of his way to attack a man to whom I am under obligations?'

'He did it from the highest motives, sir,' I replied firmly.

'The highest motives, Strood!' returned the Squire, pushing the idea away with a contemptuous wag of his stubborn chin. 'His confounded motives will get him fined for libel! I've just heard from Sir Louis Finck, who says it's only his regard for

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me that prevents him bringing an action for slander. He tells me, too, that the stupid fellow has been made a tool of by a gang of unscrupulous blackmailers. I've received a letter to the same effect from Lawrence's college tutor, who points out that, if the young idiot persists in defying the authorities, he'll be sent down for good. If Lawrence mistakes this sort of thing for glory, I don't.'

Here the Squire looked at me. As I could not afford to quarrel with him I replied, 'Naturally not.'

Then he bluntly told me why he wanted me.

'You know,' he said, 'that Lawrence and I are scarcely on speaking terms. If I see him now he's sure to say something damned impudent. I want you to give him a warning. You're supposed to be his friend.'

'I trust I am, sir,' I replied.

'In that case you'll help him to see things as they are,' he resumed.

'How do you wish him to see them?' I asked boldly.

'You mean, what do I want him to do? Well, you must make him clearly understand that if he runs after that young woman and insists on his attacks on Sir Louis Finck, I'll stop his allowance and leave him to go to the devil at his own pace.'

But under the Squire's anger I now perceived that a certain sense of malevolent satisfaction was lurking, and guessed that events to some extent were running in the direction of his wishes. Of this I was convinced Mrs. Dalzell was the cause. This lady, the wife of the late Mrs. Rivers's cousin, had become an almost permanent guest at Beckstone

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Park, where her presence gave rise to scandal of the usual sort. A handsome woman of thirty-five, her influence over 'her cousin,' as she called the Squire, was of the kind that even innocent women doubt. 'The Squire,' said the neighbourhood, 'would marry the lady if he could!' Unluckily, Mr. Berners Dalzell, the husband—an anæmic but able little engineer employed by a firm in the United States—stood in the way, but without apparently objecting to his wife brightening the Squire's lonely hearth with her attractive presence. Personally, I liked Mrs. Dalzell, whose cheerfulness and tact added a charm which the big house badly needed. Even had I been Lawrence, I might, I think, have accepted her with resignation, but young Rivers tolerated nothing which his high spirit disapproved; whenever, therefore, Mrs. Dalzell was staying at Beckstone (she was always accompanied by her niece), the young man was to be found in rooms in London. His manner to his father and his alleged cousin was perfectly respectful, but his methods were less reassuring, and Mrs. Dalzell has more than once expressed to me how deeply she felt Lawrence's avoidance of her. This, then, was now the situation. Behind each of the Riverses was a woman, and when we study their conduct we must make allowances for this imponderable influence on both. Conscious of this, therefore, I determined to proceed with caution, and having done my best to soothe the Squire, started early next day to convey his message to his son. I do not deny that I felt a certain pride in being sent on such a delicate mission, nor could I help accepting it as a compliment both to the strength of my understanding and the delicacy of my diplomacy.

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'Of course,' said my godfather when I left him, 'you'll say nothing of this business to your step-mother.'

'Certainly not,' I replied.

Then he gave me a ten-pound note to pay my expenses.

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CHAPTER V

I ARRIVED at Oxford early in the afternoon, and took a hansom for St. Bede's, leaving my bag at 'The Crozier' on the way. I had never been to Oxford in term-time before, and as I approached the venerable walls of St. Bede's, I was struck by the number of youths in pumps who not only freely displayed themselves in the narrow way leading to its precincts, but even dared to invade the smarter proprieties of the neighbouring High Street. Because of this 'foot-wear' (why I cannot tell), I at once recognised these young men to be undergraduates. The seven-and-sixpenny pump is ill-suited to the rigours of an Oxford spring; it assorts ill with tweed or flannel clothes of sporting cut and pattern; it defies the gothic suggestions of a cap-and-gown, but enjoys certain raffish associations with casinos and nightly dissipations—in short, it has something of the character of a badge, and represents a shadowy ideal of 'life.' I may be wrong—the critic outside the magic circle generally is, and the universities have mysteries which the uninitiated cannot hope to penetrate—but I could not help thinking, as I passed into the quadrangle of St. Bede's, that I had faintly realised something of the meaning of the undergraduates' devotion to the quickly-donned, pointed-toed, frail piece of patent-leather worn by the youths who

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glanced at me with that air of aloof superiority with which the elect regard those unadmitted to the secret.

It was a cold spring day; the east wind chased heavy masses of cloud across the sky; an icy draught followed me up the dark staircase leading to Lawrence's rooms. I knocked; his familiar voice cried 'Come in!'

I entered a low-roofed, dark-panelled room. The dancing fire was reflected in the shining oak. Before the blaze sat a young man warming his feet and reading a paper. Rivers, who was seated at a table covered with a litter of papers, sprang up to welcome me.

'John!' he exclaimed. 'You're the man I least expected.'

He shook me by the hand warmly. His eyes were brighter and, if possible, more eager than ever; his wonderful face fuller of intense life.

'I've come to see you on business,' I answered. At the signal the young man with the newspaper slowly rose to his feet. He was a tall, square-shouldered youth, red-haired and freckled. A look of mischief lurked in the corner of his eyes and mouth.

'I'll be off then,' he said. 'Remember, Rivers, it's all arranged. I've distributed seventy-five of these things.'

He glanced at the table, where I saw a pile of small square cards marked at the top 'A.F.A.' Whilst Lawrence accompanied the red-haired man to the door, I ventured to take one up and read the following: 'A.F.A. The Quad, St. Bede's V.S.C.'

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I heard Lawrence say, 'Don't let them make fools of themselves, Quiney.'

The other replied, 'Trust me.'

Then the door closed. Lawrence stepped back in the room.

'What mystery is brewing?' I asked, holding the card in my hand. 'What does A.F.A. stand for?'

'Anti-Finck Agitation,' he replied.

'And V.S.?'

'The Verbum Sap is a sort of club. Better known as "A Word to the Wise Club." Quiney, who has just gone out, got it up. It is supposed to look after the interests of undergraduates. It is a ridiculous concern. Oxford is a big nursery managed by clumsy nurses. Quiney pretends his club is one of the perambulators.'

'But what has the club to do with the Finck agitations?' I asked. 'That is serious enough surely.'

'As serious as anything here ever is, John,' he answered. 'Quiney is an ally—a compromising one perhaps, but of use in making an impression. But, John, what brings you here?'

'This Finck business,' I answered. 'I've a message from your father.'

At this point my eyes wandered across the room to the photograph on the mantelpiece guarded on each side by shafts of pale daffodils. I knew it was Mrs. Leighton.

He followed my eyes, and as he often did, guessed my thoughts.

'Diana is here now,' he said. 'Tell me what my father wants of me.'

At this I seemed to see fresh troubles.

'You won't be rash, Lawrence, will you?' I urged,

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remembering my duties as a diplomatist. 'He means well—your father does—even though he *is* autocratic.'

Rivers laughed.

'I know what he sent you to say, John. Don't spare me. Nothing matters now. I'm beyond all the clumsy arrows.'

I was struck by the strange ring in his voice. His blue eyes looked extraordinarily happy. The phrase, I know, is excessive, but his face seemed transfigured by the sweep of the emotion. Then I realised that if ever a man was in love Lawrence Rivers was. In spite of, or rather in consequence of this conviction, I felt I must keep to the unemotional world in which we lived in the Ways and Means Department.

'Your father sent for me yesterday, Lawrence,' I said. 'Sir Louis Finck had written to say that only his respect for the Squire prevented him from prosecuting you.'

'Well?' returned Rivers, watching me.

'Then he went on to say,' I replied, losing my diplomatic tact under eyes which had a strange power of dragging the crude truth from men, 'that he feared you were under the influence of a woman. I replied that you were acting from the highest motives. This, I'm sorry to say, he brushed aside. Finally, he instructed me to tell you that if you don't break with Mrs. Leighton—please forgive my bluntness, Lawrence—and cease attacking Sir Louis Finck, he will stop your allowance and forbid you his house.'

To my surprise my message left Rivers unmoved.

'I was waiting for this,' he said. 'Tell my father

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he's the last man in the world whom I expect to do justice to my motives.'

'My dear Lawrence,' I protested, 'how can I?'

'I leave you to choose the words,' he went on. 'We could scarcely be farther apart than we are. What has happened has given him the opportunity he wanted. When we talk of influences, we mustn't forget those behind him. Because you have a most amiable desire to patch up a quarrel, John, don't pretend not to see the truth.'

'If,' said I, 'you mean Mrs. Dalzell, I think you're wrong.'

'Wrong, am I?' he replied. 'Filial piety forbids me sounding those depths!'

Remembering my own stepmother, I answered his look with a feeble nod.

'This is how the matter stands between me and my father, John. He has sent you as the bearer of terms which he knows I can't accept. The stratagem is one constantly practised in our unhappy politics. It's equally useful in embittering family quarrels. This ancient form of craft's horribly human. Cannibals probably used it in their bargains as the first step towards a festival with cooking-pots. Surely my father's real purpose of ridding himself of me presents itself to your mind?'

He smiled slightly, for, of course, it had.

'But that's no reason, Lawrence, why you should permit yourself to be checkmated by it,' I replied. 'Why not send me back to him with the diplomatic answer that turneth away wrath?'

'You mean temporise, John? That's the world's plan. But remember this isn't a question of the market-places. There are precious things beyond

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reach of human bargainings. I can't say more. The things of the heart are degraded by our muddy prose.'

'But if he cuts off supplies?' I urged, glancing once more involuntarily towards Mrs. Leighton's portrait.

'Well, then, he must cut them off and we must find other ways,' he answered.

'Fortunately the estate's entailed,' I said.

Rivers made no reply. A grave-toned clock struck the hour. His thoughts were elsewhere.

'I have an engagement,' he said suddenly. 'Come too, John. I will introduce you. She has heard of you.'

He left me for a moment and returned in cap and gown. There was something in his manner hard to describe. He seemed cut off from things about him in dreams of his own. Rivers could not live in the breathless pastures where John Strood was placidly battening. The fire within him made my own faint glimmer of practical sense invisible. What advice could I give such a man? And so he swept me along in spite of myself.

'Come,' he said, 'we're late.'

Then he hurried me across the quadrangle, down the High Street, where the little groups of strolling gownsmen glanced after us curiously, to the Hurlingham Hotel, where Mrs. Leighton received us in her private room.

'Diana,' exclaimed Lawrence, when he had introduced me, 'John has brought the message I expected.'

Mrs. Leighton shook hands and looked at me behind a smile of singular charm. No man ever yet succeeded in making another realise a woman's

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beauty by trying to describe it. Photography, that misses the light of the nature within, only dimly suggests it; the brush of genius itself rarely reaches its truth. Mrs. Leighton's features were straight and perfect; her eyes, blue in some lights, grey in others, had the power of diffusing a sense of serenity about her. Busy, bustling people, who chatter volubly, relaxed their tiresome tension in her presence. Contrasted to Lawrence's fire she seemed a luminous cloud—an illusion the bright chestnut hair clustering about her forehead deepened. Few lovelier women ever inspired a poet. As I stood between them, conscious of a strange glow half of wonder, half of unselfish apprehension, I knew that they were living in a world where the standards set by the Ways and Means Department had no meaning—the world in which Dido died and Guinevere sinned. And yet in spite of this spell—I hate the language of exaggeration, but have no other word for it—I still remembered that Mrs. Leighton was also an adventurous woman separated from a contemptible husband, and Rivers an eccentric undergraduate, in the eyes of the world about to make a fool of himself.

I stood in the whirl wondering what would come of it, and as I wondered, it flashed in on me that I was intended to be the chronicler.

'Has Gerald been?' asked Lawrence.

'Yes,' she answered; 'he will be back soon. I want you to talk with him. He keeps on saying he can afford no risks!'

Gerald, I knew, was her brother, senior scholar at St. Bede's—a careful youth terrified, I inferred, at their fiery pace.

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For a moment, standing side by side near the fire, they talked together in low voices, scarcely conscious of my presence. The understanding between them was complete. Suddenly the door opened; a black-haired young man with bright eyes shining behind spectacles entered the room. As he glanced from them to me his manner was anxious, and I guessed that he was the brother.

Lawrence introduced us. I was, he said, bearer of a parental ultimatum. Mrs. Leighton smiled; Read's face became graver still.

After a few words Rivers and Read left the room, and I was alone with Mrs. Leighton.

'My brother Gerald,' she said in explanation of their departure, 'is worrying himself. He fears we are jeopardising his career.'

'At college?' I asked—for I began timidly.

'And afterwards,' she added.

'That depends what happens,' I observed; 'although what can happen beyond Lawrence being expelled I can't see.'

This, of course, was untrue, for the direction in which these two were rushing might tempt the intervention of Mr. Bill Leighton; but I was feeling my way.

Here her candour ceased and mine began.

'It's only a threat, then?' she said.

'What, on the Squire's side? Oh no, Mrs. Leighton; he's in earnest. If Lawrence doesn't surrender he'll cut him off from everything he can.'

'How he must hate Lawrence!' said she.

'He can't understand him. Few do,' I replied.

'Do you?' she asked.

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'I am beginning to.' I said this with meaning, but her eyes never wavered. 'He is a poet,' I went on, 'whose talent I respect.'

But she broke in with a laugh.

'"Whose talent you respect," Mr. Strood! Lawrence Rivers is a man with whom any man ought to be pleased to ride the whirlwind if necessary.'

'He's more likely to find a woman to share that dangerous feat,' I answered.

'You're on his father's side, I see,' she returned quietly.

'I'm not,' I said. 'I love Lawrence. But what will he do if he's cut off supplies. The Squire's quite a manageable tyrant, and I wish you would use your influence with Lawrence and give me a chance of mending the breach between them.'

'You know how the trouble began between them?' she answered.

'There was always trouble between them. They never shared a thought in common. I know, of course, when the real quarrel—or rather the Squire's side of it—began. But Lawrence should remember that his father might have married again (we all expected he would) and make allowances.'

At this she looked at me with surprise in her eyes.

'Your advice,' she said, 'isn't like the advice one expects from a young man, Mr. Strood.'

'I'm about the same age as Lawrence, and, I trust, in spite of my years, something of a man of the world.'

'The phrase terrifies me,' she answered. 'The kingdom of the man of the world sprang out of the tares sown by the Evil One.'

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The phrase startled me. It was pure Lawrence Rivers. I perceived how profoundly the woman must be under the sway of the youth!

'But what answer can I take back to his father?' I continued. 'You're his friend, I know, Mrs. Leighton.'

Here she interrupted me.

'His friend? I see you doubt it, Mr. Strood.'

'No,' I protested; 'but in certain cases there's nothing so difficult as friendship. Forgive me for saying so, Mrs. Leighton. There's that poem, you know, "The Mountain Side," which everybody's talking about. Lawrence has been so advertised that the name of the lady coupled with his must suffer.'

I was astonished at my own courage. Perhaps I was spurred on by the prospect of my meeting with the Squire.

'What did his father say to the poem?' she asked, to parry, I imagine, my last thrust.

'He called it indecent,' I answered bluntly, 'and tried to persuade himself that Lawrence wrote to the papers to claim the authorship. I never told Lawrence that. It would only make him more bitter with his father, so please keep it a secret. He knows who 'D. L.' is—Sir Louis Finck has made that clear. Still, stupid as it all is, we must remember that, in the Squire's eyes, poetry is as ridiculous as a concert on the Jew's harp.'

'You are satirical, Mr. Strood,' she answered, colouring.

'No, Mrs. Leighton, I'm not; I'm candid. I only want you to see things as they are, or rather as they present themselves to old Mr. Rivers and a good

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many other dull people too. Dullness has its rights, just as genius has. I wish we could get Lawrence to see that.'

'Now I know why that dreadful old man chose you as his messenger,' she said.

But I did not flinch.

'He sent me because I've known Lawrence all my life. If, in my zeal, I've been clumsy and rude, Mrs. Leighton, please forgive me.'

'I'm to understand, then, that you have been bullying me for my good,' she answered. 'The messenger is worthy—well, worthy of the confidence reposed in him!'

This stung me to a bolder attack.

'Don't misunderstand me, please, Mrs. Leighton,' I said. 'Remember I'm on Lawrence's side, not his father's, and that's why I can't bear to see him courting disaster the moment we are all beginning to expect great things.'

'That's what my brother Gerald says, only he's thinking of himself and a fellowship at St. Bede's. But who first recognised Lawrence's talent?'

She looked at me almost triumphantly.

'Perhaps you did,' I said; 'you may have helped to inspire it. If you are generous you will help to save it for him. In this country the man who begins by defying conventions can't hope to succeed. The row up here over the Finck business doesn't matter, even if it ends in Lawrence being expelled. The public like to see Ajax defying the lightning when his cause is an honest one. But, on the other hand, the hero of a social scandal—even if he's a Lancelot—has never any chance with them.'

She rose from her chair by the fire, pale and

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agitated, and stood leaning against the mantelpiece looking at me.

'Haven't you given your message to the wrong one?' she asked at last.

'I've given it to you—or rather the worst side of it—because I daren't give it to Lawrence. He's—he's—how can I put it?—well, he's been carried away.'

The door opened, the man himself entered the room. It was now almost dark. The lamps had not been lit, but the firelight shone on her beautiful face.

'What has John told you?' he asked, looking at her intently.

She laughed—this time quite naturally.

'Mr. Strood has made me feel, as Lady Macbeth might have felt, if she had consulted the witches instead of sending her husband.'

'We've been all over the business which brought me here,' I interposed, a little apprehensively.

'I've been tormenting Mr. Strood with questions, but couldn't penetrate his amiable reticence. Please ring the bell, and we'll have tea.'

I obeyed, a little proud of my gallant effort on the side of the virtues.

Ladies have since told me that Mrs. Leighton must have been one of those immodest women whose motives men alone fail to see through. I can only say that this idea never occurred to me, nor can I, even at this distance, apply to her conduct the measure which, at least outwardly, helps to maintain the domestic purity of the shop-parlour.

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CHAPTER VI

I WAS too excited to have an appetite for dinner—even in Hall. Above the odours of roast beef and somewhat imperfectly boiled cabbage which floated round the heads of the diners, mingling with the smell of fried soles from the High Table, I seemed conscious of something more formidable in suspense. From the walls of the noble Refectory ancient college dignitaries looked down on us, supported, here and there, by portraits of modern Bedeans more or less known to fame. A distinguished early Victorian judge squared his burly shoulders under his wig next to the frail poet whom St. Bede's honoured after his death. St. Bede's is proud of its pictures, and treasured for many years a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds without recognising that master's hand until the discovery was made by the cleaners. I still recall my impressions—the clatter of knives and forks, the hum of conversation under the noble roof, the lines of young faces, but, above all, the solid peace of the place, and what I felt brewing to disturb, if only for a moment, this venerable self-complacency. The What Has Been and the What Might Be seemed to my imagination jostling above the lines of feeding gownsmen. I remember, too, recalling memories of 'Mr. Verdant Green' to restore my confidence in myself; but, because I have no

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taste for flippancy, finding no comfort therein. While Lawrence Rivers was talking and laughing in high spirits, I thought of Romeo wondering at his own buoyancy before his tragic fate—misgivings Quiney, the red-haired President of 'The Word to the Wise Club,' increased when I overheard him whisper to his neighbour, 'Alas! regardless of their fate the little victims play!' a remark which drew from the other the, to me, inappropriate reply—'You should see my mask!'

'They haven't the slightest idea of the "rag" in store for 'em,' murmured Quiney, glancing towards the High Table.

'Has he?' asked the neighbour, after slaking his thirst in a noble silver tankard, and looking through Quiney and me in the direction of Rivers.

'Not in its true dimensions,' returned Quiney.

Here the two undergraduates exchanged meaning grins which, on my detecting, perhaps with a disapproving eye, Quiney politely hoped I wasn't bored with Oxford. After this he turned the conversation to the Ways and Means Department, where an uncle of his once discharged the onerous duties of Chief Clerk. His relative was, he informed me, 'rather a prig, but with a fine taste in port wine!' I replied slightly on the defensive, that it was quite as easy to become a prig outside, an argument which he accepted with the qualification, 'only so long as a fellow had enough to eat!' Priggishness, he maintained, was a moral eruption common to the well-fed and over-educated classes.

When dinner was over, I accompanied Lawrence to his rooms where the conspirators were to assemble. Their plans were obscure to me. 'I won't tell you,

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John,' said Lawrence. 'You would feel tempted to give good advice, and I 'm not in the mood for it.'

'What do you expect me to do then?' I asked.

'Nothing. Then you will have the satisfaction of telling us how foolish we have been afterwards.'

A number of young men, Quiney among them, had now assembled. In the neighbouring rooms there was also much hurrying to and fro. Lawrence's windows looked on the great quadrangle. The night was dark and cloudy, but I could see groups gathering before the various doorways evidently preparing a demonstration.

I guessed, too, from the whispers about me, that there existed other means both of ingress and egress than those recognised by the doorkeeper of St. Bede's; by the latter, the daring intruders from other colleges hoped to escape. Mr. Quiney and his myrmidons, I inferred, had taken their precautions, both protective and aggressive.

Whilst I was still gathering these impressions, growing every minute more conscious that the air was thick with undergraduate mischief, suddenly Quiney reappeared and said, 'Rivers! we 're ready.'

Then Lawrence and the four or five satellites who had attached themselves to him, and who seemed most in earnest, left the room and hurried to the quadrangle. I followed.

In the centre of the quadrangle, dimly lighted by the gleams from the distant gas-lamps, a crowd of about a hundred undergraduates had quietly collected. From the windows less daring spirits were looking on. When they saw Rivers, some one shouted 'Three cheers for the Great Man'—the nickname which followed him from school — and then, while the

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throng shouted, Lawrence sprang on a chair and tried to address the meeting.

I now began to see that the majority had come to the meeting for something more exciting than speech-making. Some one shouted in a melodramatic voice, 'Friends! deeds, not words!' Another cried, 'Let 'em have it hot, Great Man!'

Rivers held up his hand for silence, whilst serious men cried 'Order! order!' Then amid the horse-play and confusion I heard him say that the obstinacy and vanity of the authorities had driven them to protest within the very walls of St. Bede's, where men 'worshipped wealth even more passionately than in any other centres of bigotry where incense was offered to Finck and his fellows.'

'Stick that down, reporter!' cried a voice. 'Good old Hogsback!' shouted another—the opprobrious nickname identified an unpopular Don — then a cracker exploded—and, as at a given signal, suddenly the men covered their faces with grotesque masks, and the little riot was in full swing.

For this puerile exhibition Rivers, I know, was unprepared. After an effort to restore order he gave up the attempt, and stood watching the proceedings with amusement, heedless of what was in store for him. The earnest men (without masks) however still shouted 'Order! order!' but no one heeded them in the uproar following the raising of a big linen placard on two poles, on which appeared the following inscription:—

'Celebration of the Finck Carnival!
Apotheosis of Sir Louis after the cleansing fires!'

Then, the thickest part of the throng separating,

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I beheld, tied in a chair, a neatly constructed figure in cap and gown.

'All hail, Finck!' yelled a voice.

Then came a little spurt of flame from the guy, and an organised howl—the war-cry, I learnt afterwards, of 'The Word to the Wise Club'—a yell imported from a Far-Western college by an American student and used now at St. Bede's for the first time. The fire hissed and leapt round the combustible figure, the glow lit up the venerable walls of the college; a band of masked undergraduates, seizing hands, proceeded to execute round the now blazing guy a dance as grotesque as their fancy and pantomime masks permitted.

But the uproar was now so great—an uproar constantly increased by the banging of crackers and squibs—that I began to feel a certain personal anxiety. I knew nothing of the system of enforcing discipline practised at our seats of learning, nor what their powers might be over an intruding stranger. Moreover, I was absent from my office on the plea of urgent family affairs. There were, I knew, mysterious guardians of the University peace, known as Proctors and Bull-dogs, who might at any moment descend on the riotous crowd and possibly, after arresting, might report me to the Chief Clerk at the Ways and Means Department for impudent participation in a vulgar riot. Meanwhile, however, the explosive heart of the guy had been touched—and the Finck effigy was expiring in a series of startling bangs which, scattering burning fragments across the quadrangle, gave dramatic finish to the closing scene.

Suddenly there was a warning shout, followed by

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a rush; the throng scattered in the direction each thought safest; there was much whooping behind masks; a gentleman, in spectacles and cap and gown, suddenly astonished me by demanding—

'Name and college, sir!'

Whilst I was hurriedly explaining who I was and why I was there, the guy expired in a flutter of leaping crackers.

'I'm afraid your friend has done for himself,' said the agent of college discipline after listening with some interest to my perhaps over-elaborate explanation. Then he left me and proceeded to take the names of a couple of belated maskers from another college who had found escape by back exits impossible.

Meanwhile Rivers had been requested to call on the Dean to-morrow to hear that gentleman's decision.

'You will be able to report to my father what has happened,' he said.

I wished him good-night and withdrew, prepared for the worst. At the foot of his staircase I met Gerald Read returning from spending the evening with Professor Rumble, the famous authority on Babylonian Numbers.

'*You* were not there,' I observed.

'At that ridiculous "rag,"' he replied. 'Certainly not.'

He seemed uneasy.

'What will happen?' I asked.

'To Rivers?' he asked. 'He has had his warning, and will have to go.'

We were about to separate when, after some hesitation, he turned to me suddenly and asked, 'What shall you tell his father, Mr. Strood?'

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'I'm not sure,' I replied. 'Not more than I'm obliged.'

'You'll keep my sister's name out of it if you can?'

'Of course,' I said.

'Rivers is so headstrong,' he went on, 'and my sister so unconventional that they are sure to be misunderstood. It puts me in an awkward position up here.'

Then, in an effort to be consolatory, I made an awkward speech. 'Lawrence,' I said, 'is so young. There can be nothing serious in it.'

'In what?' he asked.

'In—well, in this—eh—business between them. I even ventured to speak about it to your sister.'

'What did she say?' he asked.

'Nothing that I can repeat to you.'

'Good God, man!' he exclaimed. 'You don't mean they're both bent on making a serious scandal of it?'

I now felt the necessity of plain-speaking.

'It's best,' I said, 'to be candid, though the subject is a painful one to you. Your sister has the greatest influence over Rivers. The future of both depends how she exerts it. As the bearer of an ultimatum from Lawrence's father I told her this, and I'm convinced that she fully understands the risks.'

Read's face looked pale in the moonlight.

'Risks!' he exclaimed, 'what does she care for risks? She only thinks of herself and the excitement of the moment. Good night!'

He left me, and I found my way back to 'The Crozier,' where, in the smoking-room, I heard much inaccurate gossip on the subject of the 'rag' at

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St. Bede's. The view taken was that Rivers would be 'hoofed out' at once. 'The fellow has got mixed up with a woman,' said a red-faced pipe-smoker, who had succeeded in carrying into middle life the pert bearing of the undergraduate. 'She has followed him up here, and can't let him alone. She 's sister to a scholar at St. Bede's.'

'Pretty rough on the scholar!' said another smoker.

No wonder poor Read was worried!

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CHAPTER VII

By ten o'clock next morning we knew the worst. The spirit of mischief at St. Bede's had been more rampant even than I supposed. Two unpopular Dons had been 'screwed' in their rooms, and it was deemed necessary 'to make an example.' Moreover, Rivers had already been warned. In the picturesque language of the undergraduates, he was peremptorily 'hoofed out.' Thus ended Lawrence's connection with St. Bede's which, but for the unjustifiable candidature of Sir Louis Finck, might have been honourable to both. To assume that Rivers in opposing this was bent on seeking vulgar notoriety, as his enemies have done, is too base a calumny for me to attempt to refute. Throughout his conduct was purely disinterested. As an agitator, however injudicious his methods, their result was satisfactory. A full account of the burning of Finck's effigy in the quadrangle of St. Bede's appeared in the London papers. It was followed by 'a dignified letter' on the part of Sir Louis, declining to accept the honour which the University still desired to bestow upon him. This closed the controversy.

In later years I heard the Master of St. Bede's (who was on the sick list at a foreign watering-place at the time), declare that, had he been in residence, Rivers would not have been sacrificed.

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After his interview with the authorities, Lawrence came to me at 'The Crozier' and told me what had happened. It was decided that he should accompany me to London at once, and stay with me till some arrangement could be made with his father.

I was living in rooms between Oxford Street and Bryanston Square. When I became a clerk in the Ways and Means Department my father's wife decided that it would be 'pleasanter for me to feel myself entirely independent.' With this view she found the uncheerful apartments, and even added to their comfort by bestowing on me two tough horse-hair armchairs which, for the last ten years, had been collecting dust in a lumber-room. Whilst I was 'feeling my feet' as a Civil Service clerk, she further permitted my father to allow me £75 a year as a sort of solatium for being debarred the run of his house, but on the understanding that the allowance ceased whenever my salary touched £250 a year.

I am ashamed to obtrude these domestic details on the public, but it is necessary, in order that my relations with my friend may not be misinterpreted. It will now be seen that if he wanted funds that I was not in a position to supply them. Now in money matters Rivers, unlike his father, was extraordinarily generous, but I fear I must add exceedingly careless. How far the consciousness that he was heir to the increasing revenues of an entailed estate may have accounted for this indifference I am unable to say, but when he arrived in London I discovered, to my dismay, that he had only a few shillings in his pocket, and 'nothing at the bank!' What a position for the heir to Beckstone Park, and the youthful

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poet whose lyrics had called forth a Laureate's praises!

'The most notable thing about my Oxford career,' Rivers used to say, 'was the ending of it.'

When his fate became known, 'The Word to the Wise Club' determined to give him an honourable 'send-off'; of this the adroit and mischievous Quiney, whom no thunders of the Dons ever reached, was the chief organiser. Having received the hint, I took my bag to the ancient portals guarding the quadrangle of St. Bede's, where a number of undergraduates had assembled.

Here I found Rivers expostulating with Quiney, whilst dozens of undergraduates in hansoms took up their stations behind that in which my friend and I were about to drive to the station.

'But, my dear Quiney,' Lawrence was saying, 'it's so ridiculous.'

To which the other replied: 'My dear Rivers, you are no doubt a poet, but you are also a public man sacrificed in a good cause. As citizens it is our duty to honour you.'

Finally we drove to the station, the first of a long string of cabs. In one of these sat a daring youth playing the Marseillaise on a neat but noisy barrel-organ borrowed for the purpose. The demonstration was ridiculous, but it amused those responsible for it, and, as Quiney pointed out, 'took off the sting of defeat.'

The railway authorities, recognising the dramatic interests of the moment, reserved us a compartment. Our friends, gathering round a window, called for a speech, to which Rivers bluntly replied 'Nonsense!' At this Quiney, mounting on the carriage-step, said:

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'Gentlemen! this is no time for "rotting." The moment is historic. Lawrence Rivers has this day lighted a fire in the University which even the foolish horse-play of freshmen shall not put out. The champion of our rights is starting on a new career, he is followed by our warmest wishes. Let him also be encouraged by our least discordant acclamations.'

At this he raised his hand, and, for the second time, I heard the 'war-cry' of the Club, which bore distinct resemblance to the agitated clamour of a panic-stricken cock grouse.

Then Lawrence looked from the window and laughed; a voice cried, 'Good-bye, old fellow, St. Bede's won't forget you!' the engine snorted; doors slammed; the train rolled out of the station.

And this was the last that Rivers saw of Oxford.

I remember little of our conversation. I remarked that in the excitement of the day I had omitted to say good-bye to Mrs. Leighton.

'She went up to London by a morning train,' he replied. Then he looked at me intently a moment and said, 'Diana is grateful to you for your good advice, John.'

Then, to cut short further conversation, he opened a French book which lay on the seat beside him, and began to read quietly whilst I sat wondering what would happen. I could not afford to quarrel with the Squire, and I loved and honoured his son. Clearly, therefore, it was both my duty, and would be to my advantage, to avert the threatened breach between them. But how was it to be done—especially with a woman in each of the hostile camps? As I look back now, I cannot help

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regretting my immaturity. Had I then possessed the knowledge of the world which ten years later I acquired, the future course of my friend's life might have been directed into lawful channels where his high aims might have reaped a nobler harvest. But the hand of destiny was against him. Passion enthralled him, and the crop was a tragic growth.

I ought, no doubt, on arriving in London, to have taken counsel with my father. Unfortunately he was incapable of acting without the support of his wife, and I was determined that my stepmother's interference should not complicate the crisis. On arriving in London, therefore, we went straight to my rooms, where Lawrence was allotted by Mrs. Groom a square dark bedchamber on the top floor, overlooking a leprous growth of dingy chimney-pots and the yard of a noisy mews. Then our landlady supplied us with a cheerless meal of hot roast mutton, followed by a pale and eggless rice pudding which we ate in silence, till the answer to the telegram, despatched by Lawrence from Paddington Station, dispelled the shadow of his doubts. It summoned him to Kensington where, in a flat near the High Street, Mrs. Leighton was living. She had followed him to Oxford: she had preceded him to London.

I looked at him, as he flushed with pleasure over the sheet of pale pink paper, and said, with some reproach in my voice, 'Lawrence! I'm going to see your father. What shall I tell him?'

He reflected a moment. Probably the question of money glimmered dimly before his mind, but the telegram had lifted him above such cares. 'You must make,' he answered, 'the best bargain you can.

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I'm afraid I can scarcely expect you to teach your godfather the elementary duties of a parent. He has now before him evidence of my revolt and defeat. What he was waiting for has happened. The only point between us now to be settled is that of ways and means. The experience you have gained in your office, John, in this should be of use to me. You might point out to him that life cannot be permanently supported on the sum of thirty shillings, nor can I perpetually claim your charitable hospitality. You won't mind me hurrying away?'

'When will you be back?'

'Say at eleven o'clock.'

Then suddenly his manner changed. Possibly his quick eyes saw a flicker of annoyance in my own, Taking me by the arm and shaking it affectionately to and fro, he said warmly, 'My dear fellow! don't think me ungrateful, but I want all your indulgence, for my heart's so full of happiness that there's room in it for nothing else. Don't ask me for explanations —come to any conclusion you think reasonable—but don't try to stop me!'

My annoyance vanished. The man was so fearlessly and radiantly in love; so incapable of descending from the sun-flushed mountain tops!

'Ask Mrs. Groom to lend you a latch-key,' I said. 'I'll do my best with the Squire.'

Then he left me.

I had written to Mr. Rivers (who was staying in town, as he said, to see me, but, I suspected, also for other reasons of his own) to tell him I would call. When I arrived at the hotel, somewhat to my embarrassment I discovered in his private room Mrs.

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Dalzell and her niece Miss Field in fullest evening dress. They received me affably. The Squire was about to take them to the play, followed by supper. I put on my best smile, and said I wouldn't detain him a moment.

'You come, of course, about this sad business, Mr. Strood,' observed Mrs. Dalzell. 'These family misunderstandings are so painful.'

'I only hope we may be able to remove them, Mrs. Dalzell,' I replied.

'I hope so too! Such a brilliant young man, isn't he, Lena?'

'Brilliant? extraordinarily,' Miss Field assented, 'but very impracticable.'

Miss Field was a tough-looking young lady with bare, muscular arms acquired in the hockey-field. Beside her aunt, rich in the second blooms of the ripening thirties, she left on the beholder an impression of gauntness and want of physical finish.

The Squire appeared, the ladies withdrew.

'I 'm taking 'em to the play and there isn't much time,' said he. 'What does the young fool say?'

Then I told him what had happened. That Lawrence sent no definite answer but hoped, on the question of an allowance, his father would act indulgently.

The Squire grunted.

'But what about that woman, Strood? Is he going to get rid of her?'

'I 'm afraid, sir, Lawrence is a little infatuated, and I hope you 'll excuse me for suggesting that perhaps we had better leave matters alone. These things wear themselves out.'

'Ripen and then rot, young wiseacre, eh?'

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'I mean, sir, that, in such a case as Lawrence's, opposition only—well, helps to fan the flame.'

'Fan the flame! Good Lord, what rubbish! D'you mean to tell me I mustn't warn my son not to make an ass of himself about a woman lest he should become a greater one?'

I accepted his rebuke in silence.

'I'm to understand he refuses to drop her, then? Where is he?' continued the Squire.

'At my lodgings, sir,' I replied meekly.

'Why didn't you bring him?'

'He thought you had no wish to see him.'

'No more I have. Why, Strood, the woman followed him to Oxford.'

'Yes, sir. I even went so far as to point out the serious risks she was running. If she took no thought for her own reputation, I urged her to remember Lawrence's. I said all I could, sir; but if you had seen them as I saw them, I'm sure you would make allowances. She is one of the most beautiful women I ever saw.'

I was championing them in spite of myself. Lawrence's eager spirit seemed to stand at my elbow to spur me on. The Squire raised his big chin in astonishment, then gave an odd sort of grin.

'You see, sir,' I urged, 'they're different to ordinary people. Lawrence is a man in a thousand. That isn't only my impression; it's the one he has left behind him at Oxford. Mrs. Leighton's older than he, but I can't help feeling that she's infatuated too.'

'That's a pretty story you're telling me, youngster,' he retorted. 'You forget she's a married woman. That's my point. The two self-indulgent idiots can

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only come together across a scandal. D'you expect me to encourage an adulterous intrigue? Don't try to get over me, sir, with any of the boy's Free Love nonsense, for I won't put up with it. I can make allowances, as you call 'em, but I'm damned if I stand this sort of game! To annoy me my son has got himself kicked out of college. I might overlook that, but you can't expect me to provide him with funds for his vices. Leighton's father was a friend of mine. I gave 'em a silver teapot when they were married. The thing's turning in a devilish ugly circle, and I've my own conscience to keep clean! Either he gives up the woman, or I'll have nothing more to do with him.'

'But Lawrence says he must have money, sir!' I protested. 'At present he has only one pound ten!'

'Then let him borrow from the lady, and be hanged to him!'

Then the Squire expanded his burly frame, gave a bull-like toss to his great jaw, and marched out of the room. I now agreed with Lawrence. The half-malicious and half-cynical old man had pushed the quarrel into grooves prepared for it. Young Rivers had resented the influence of Mrs. Dalzell; old Rivers went one better and closed his doors and his purse.

I followed the Squire down to the hall where the ladies were waiting.

'Mind you make him understand, John Strood,' he growled, turning suddenly back on me as he reached the last step. 'Don't try to soften it down with any sentimental humbug, or I won't forgive you! If my son's bent on practising this sort of thing as a fine art, he shan't do it at my expense! Is that plain enough for you?'

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When, however, he saw Mrs. Dalzell in her white ermine cloak his whole expression changed, and he gave the lady a leer of bovine admiration.

Was it a sense of moral squalor that roused my bitterness?

'Where?' I asked myself, as I followed his glance, 'did the woman get that cloak?' for I knew that the anæmic little engineer wearing out his wits in America had not sent it to her. But both my friend's interests and my own compelled me to present a smiling countenance to the Squire's guests.

'The carriage has been waiting twenty minutes!' said the lady.

But I apologised, and, with my enforced amiability in full blast, saw them into the carriage and then returned to my rooms to wait for Lawrence.

It was nearly twelve o'clock when he arrived.

'Well, John!' he exclaimed. I shook my head as a signal of what he must expect, and added as I saw the light on his face—for I was sleepy and worried—'What right have you to look so happy?'

'No right, but a hundred million reasons, John.'

He smiled indulgently.

'It can't last,' I said, determined to bring him to earth, 'especially at this rate.'

'You have had bad news, then,' he said, his thoughts still far away from my warning. The last time I had spared him; this time he must touch the mire.

I felt my arrows rattling in my quiver.

'It was a most painful interview,' I began. 'Mrs. Dalzell and her niece were there. They were all going to the theatre. I could see the Squire had been talking matters over with the lady.'

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'Why?' asked Lawrence, his face clouding.

'Because before your father came in she said something about "the family misunderstanding," and hoped it might be "adjusted."'

The name of Mrs. Dalzell had had a depressing effect. The poet was no longer in Arcadia!

'I began,' I went on, 'by telling your father what had happened, and by suggesting that he should act indulgently.'

'Indulgently?' exclaimed Lawrence.

'It was the question of the allowance,' I explained.

'I forgot that.'

'Then,' I went on, 'the Squire bluntly asked me when you intended to break with Mrs. Leighton. Then I told him that it would be more generous not to touch on that. Time, I ventured to tell him—don't look at me so savagely, Lawrence; remember I was trying to drive a bargain for you—time, I told him, sometimes cured—please forgive the phrase—these "passionate complications." What could I do with the Squire frowning down on me? "Ripen and then rot, young wiseacre," he said, "is that your experience?" He was in a hurry to get off, and his manner was most impatient, perhaps that was why he put it so brutally. He reminded me that Mrs. Leighton was a married woman, said you could only come together across a scandal, and asked me, point blank, whether you expected him to furnish the means of carrying on an intrigue?'

These shots I fired with the best intention, hoping the sting might act as a tonic.

'We are in a world reeking with carrion,' he cried angrily.

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He walked up and down the room excitedly for some moments, then he said, 'I 'll write!'

'Don't, for goodness' sake, Lawrence!' I exclaimed. 'Or, if you must write, wait till to-morrow.'

He looked at me doubtfully for a moment, and then, seeing that I was tired and worried, cried, 'Go to bed and sleep it off, John; leave our squalid quarrel to right itself.'

'I 'll see him again,' I persisted, 'if you promise not to write. Your Arcadia is a region the Squire can't enter. What is white and radiant to you, is black and disreputable to him. And don't forget Leighton's father was his friend. He gave them a Queen Anne teapot when they married!'

The teapot—for bathos hath its uses—had a sobering effect.

'What 's the good of it?' he muttered, half to himself; 'how can I expect him to understand?—besides——'

'Besides what?' I asked as he stopped.

'Never mind! Go to bed, John! I 'll read.'

From his pocket he drew the little copy of Job which he carried about with him.

But I guessed what his 'besides' covered. Lawrence meant to consult Mrs. Leighton, and, as his mind turned to her, she occupied all his thoughts and replunged him in his, to me, unnatural felicity.

But why at such a moment should he read Job?

I fell asleep wondering.

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CHAPTER VIII

WHEN we met at breakfast on the next morning Lawrence Rivers said, 'John, I must have fifty pounds at once!'

I looked, I imagined, a little doubtful, for he repeated his want more emphatically. To my mind the idea of Rivers wanting anything seemed absurd, planted as he was by birth in the prosperous lap of things.

'I wish,' I replied, 'I could let you have it. Now if it were ten pounds, perhaps——'

But he refused to listen.

'Ten's no good. To-morrow I'll to the lawyers and see what usury, more merciful than a parent, can do for me. What's pawnable, John, shall be pawned. Are there not instruments with ugly names, mortgages, post-obits, Shylock knows what, on which the greedy heir can feed his present crying wants? The fifty I claim of you, John, shall be promptly repaid—and with all reasonable interest. You must have friends with cash to spare.'

Then, I thought, not without certain misgivings, of Fletcher, a man in my office to whose post I some day hoped to succeed.

Now Fletcher was a shining light on the 'Finance Supervision' Side. When I entered it I was placed under his guidance. Sir Guy Betts, who then ruled

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that backwater of the Department, said to me the day I joined, 'Mr. Strood, Mr. Fletcher will instruct you in your duties. Whenever you are in doubt consult him.'

Sir Guy, a heavy and unwieldy gentleman, was notorious in the office for an indolence of which a pompous manner could not conceal the lethargy. Among the irreverent clerks he was known as 'Stiffun,' a name, I believe, suggested by the apparent inflexibility of his back and the inferred rigidity of his morals. Lady Betts was sister to the late Home Secretary—a connection which, in the generation preceding mine, had led to her husband's selection to the post he then held. Sir Guy naturally regarded 'influence' with reverence. Of this useful magic Fletcher had a share. His sister had married Lord Scarbridge, and it was, erroneously, I think, believed in our office that the future of the handsome and dashing clerk, in whose room I sat, was the object of his brother-in-law's solicitude.

I had not copied letters and added up columns of figures for six months under Fletcher's eye before he said (he professed the warmest regard for me): 'Strood, my boy, when my brother-in-law, Scarbridge, gets me a lift, as he shortly will, there's no reason why you shouldn't have my place. I'll see to this. It's pleasant enough so long as you save Sir Guy worry. Between you and me the Stiffun 's a prize old duffer, and would have died of gout long ago if he couldn't have left all the work in the office to me.'

This I knew was something more than an empty boast. Fletcher, who was as dexterous with figures as the most expert chartered accountant ever called in by directors to rub down figures the right way,

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and soothe the nervous apprehensions of anxious shareholders, had served his enfeebled chief as shield and buckler. Whenever he was at the office (he avoided it on the plea of health as much as he dared, the day of his enforced retirement being near) Fletcher was constantly in his chief's room, 'preventing poor old Stiffun,' as he said in his jovial insolent way, 'from making an ass of himself.' Naturally when I perceived that my brilliant senior was a power in the place, I began to covet his support and patronage both inside and outside the office. Socially, however, Fletcher soared into regions beyond the flight of the ordinary Civil Service clerk. He played polo at Hurlingham, and lived in luxurious rooms off Piccadilly. Nor was this all. Cissy Montrose, the beautiful young woman at that moment dazzling the theatrical world in that popular musical comedy *Belles and Swells*, was said to be madly in love with him. The office looked on in some wonder. 'Fletcher,' said some, 'must be up to his eyes in debt'; others of a more sanguine temperament attributed the clerk's lavish expenditure to 'luck on the turf,' or his sister's generosity. A third explanation apparently occurred to no one.

Under the paper supervision, at one end of the office of Sir Guy Betts and at the other of myself, Fletcher controlled the disbursement of considerable sums. 'You couldn't be under a better man than Mr. Fletcher,' observed Sir Guy whenever he chanced to pass me on the stairs and desired to patronise; 'he 's just such a fellow as I was at his age. Comes of a charming family too! A most amiable woman, Lady Scarbridge, Mr. Strood. I was dining in Grosvenor Square last night.'

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Fletcher took care that his chief frequently did.

One of the worst punishments to which experience subjects the man who is no fool, is to look back and admit the simple methods of craft and cunning to beguile him. The Ways and Means Department was not an attractive place on a fine day. To whatever dissipations Fletcher might abandon himself outside the office, within its walls he was indefatigable. He not only lightened the duties of his chief but spared his junior. A book which I was nominally supposed to keep was kept by him. It simplified the system, he pointed out to me, and saved time. Certainly it saved mine. Generally at four o'clock Fletcher turned to me and said, 'You can cut it, Strood. I'll deal with those vouchers. The Stiffun prefers me to see to 'em myself!'

O clumsy net set for the silly fowl! But for Fletcher's cunning and Sir Guy's indolence I might have risen in the office, and devoted to the administrative work of my country talents now frittered away on the ill-paid art of letters!

But I liked Fletcher. He made my paths easy if his own were crooked, and gave me tickets for the play. He it was who had granted me leave to absent myself from Oxford in Rivers's interests, and accounted for my absence to Sir Guy, or rather, as I afterwards learnt, concealed it from our trusting chief. I confided in Fletcher, perhaps spoke of my influence with the Squire of Beckstone and my friendship with his brilliant son. Was it not natural then that, in the present emergency, I should turn to him?

Still it was Rivers who first put the idea in my head. I had talked to him of Fletcher's amiability,

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cleverness and kindness suggesting, no doubt, that they were called forth by similar qualities of my own.

'Why not get your friend Fletcher to lend me the money?' asked Lawrence.

Here suddenly the prospect seemed to brighten.

'Perhaps, Lawrence,' I said, 'I may be able to bring it you this evening!'

Arriving at the office, I found Fletcher already there, and opened the conversation by hoping that my absence had caused him no inconvenience.

'Not a bit,' he said briskly.

I told him of Rivers's expulsion, bringing out the points likely to attract his sympathies.

'Rivers,' he said approvingly, 'seems to have made 'em sit up!'

Then I spoke of Lawrence's 'noble qualities' and 'unselfish generosity.' He was, I said, ready to sacrifice a fortune for an idea.

'The best fellows always are,' Fletcher assented.

'I knew you'd understand him,' I replied, greatly encouraged, 'and that's why I want your help.'

'What can I do?' he asked.

'Well,' said I, 'it's a matter of funds. Rivers can raise money—the estate's entailed—but until then he must live. Do you think—could you—you've been so kind, Fletcher, since I've been in the office—but could you lend me fifty pounds for him? It shall be repaid without fail.'

I blushed and stammered, but made for my friend a request impossible for myself.

His reply filled me with pleasure. 'Pay me back whenever you like, my dear fellow. I'll give you the money when you come back from lunch.'

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'O Fletcher!' I exclaimed. 'You must meet Lawrence Rivers. You *would* understand one another!'

'We might, old chap! though I'm not a poet.' Then he laughed.

How well I recall the conversation! The office fire blazing brightly, the office furniture smelling of damp polish, the grey light entering through the bald windows, and outside the angle of the smoke-stained wall of the adjoining house with a glimpse beyond of St. James's Park vexed by the east wind.

At one o'clock Fletcher said, 'Go and lunch, Strood. I've some estimates to look through for old Stiffun!'

When I returned he gave me five ten-pound notes!

'You've made a friend of Lawrence Rivers for life!' I exclaimed, 'and that means much.'

For the rest of the afternoon I drifted through the routine of the office, whilst Fletcher sat absorbed in his ledgers. Just before I left, however, he received a telegram which seemed to disturb him. When I asked him whether there was anything I could do before I went, he said, 'Yes; you can do me a favour.' Then he proceeded to explain how a certain friend of his—I inferred that the friend was a lady—had 'got into rather a mess' from which he (Fletcher) was the only man capable of rescuing her. To-morrow it would be impossible for him to come to the office. Could he trust me to see certain returns sent in to the proper quarters, and to keep old Stiffun from fidgeting? 'I'd ask him for a day off,' he continued, 'but as I act as one half of the old boy's brain and the other's addled, he gets in a fever when I'm away.'

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Warm with the liveliest sense of gratitude, I protested that it would delight me to help him.

'I 'm sure of that,' he said. Then, after a pause, he took me a step further.

'First let me tell you, Strood,' he said, 'how much I appreciate your delicacy in asking no questions.'

'My dear Fletcher!' I exclaimed, 'I have the fullest trust in you.'

He thanked me, and proceeded to tell me that if he did not appear at the office on Thursday I was to make out the best case for him with Sir Guy Betts I could.

'What,' I asked, 'shall I say?'

'Well, you see, if the Stiffun and that young fool Byas get ferreting among my papers, they 'll make hay of my scheme of work.'

I nodded.

'To prevent it, I 'll take the key of the safe.'

'It 's against the rules,' said I.

'I 've often broken it,' said he.

'Why not leave the key,' said I, 'and let me assume, if the Stiffun gets excited, that you 've taken it by mistake. You see, if he got over-excited, he 's capable of anything!'

'So he is,' said Fletcher. 'Not a bad idea.'

His approval encouraged me, and I proceeded along the path of folly.

'Before he discovers you haven't taken the key you 'll be back here to explain. You can always manage him and, in any case, I should be the only man to blame.'

'I 'd see that was all right,' said he.

Gratitude made me desire a real sacrifice on his false altar!

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After this I left Fletcher and hurried home to hand over my booty to Lawrence Rivers, whose reception of it chagrined me.

'What interest is your friend asking?' he inquired.

'Interest, Lawrence! You don't know Fletcher. He never spoke of interest. We are to repay the loan when we like.'

'How odd!' he exclaimed.

'Why odd?'

'I hope you'll forgive me for saying so, John,' he answered gently, 'but the impression you have given me of Fletcher is not the same that he has made on you.'

'How, Lawrence?'

'Well, he seems to me a greedy fellow devoted to coarse pleasures and endowed with the low cunning necessary to attain them cheaply.'

This staggered me for the moment.

'Why greedy?' I asked.

'He spends much more money on himself than he can possibly earn, and is said at the office to get it either from his sister, Lady Scarbridge, or as an amateur bookmaker.'

It was thus Rivers pieced together the gossip I had retailed to him.

'Evidently I've given you a very wrong idea,' I replied, somewhat offended. 'Wait till you meet Fletcher. If he were not a kind-hearted, generous fellow, would he have lent us fifty pounds without even asking for a receipt?'

'That is where the contradiction is,' returned Lawrence. 'But perhaps I am growing suspicious from wallowing in the Finck element too long.

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Good night, John, and forgive me for criticising your friend. A dog is kennelled in my soul that must bark.'

'Lawrence,' I said, 'you are unjust to Fletcher. Come to the office on Thursday and see him. He lent the money because he admires you!'

But Rivers shook his head. 'Your friend's money has given me the wings I want,' he said, smiling. 'I shall be at Elcombe. I leave at once.'

Then I understood. At Elcombe lived Mrs. Garway, the devoted friend of Diana Leighton whom he would meet there.

He shook my hand and hurriedly left me.

On the following morning all went smoothly at the office until Sir Guy Betts came into my room. Some returns with which both he and I were supposed to be conversant were wanted at the Board of Trade. Where were they?

'They shall be sent in to-morrow, Sir Guy,' I said, 'when Mr. Fletcher returns.'

But my answer left my chief still dissatisfied.

'Where is the key of the safe?' he asked. 'No doubt he left them there.'

'I'm afraid Mr. Fletcher must have taken it with him.'

I lied, as it were, automatically. My mind launched the lie before I was even conscious that it had been built. Now the philosopher will feel for the lie a sympathy which the cold-blooded moralist is even incapable of imagining. The latter sees in it only base interest paid on the borrowed fifty pounds. But is the case so crude? It was with me a question of lying or breaking my promise to the man who I imagined had treated me generously. It seemed

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to me that I was paying a debt of honour at the expense of truth!

But truly it was a costly lie, although it satisfied Sir Guy Betts for the time!

'I suppose we must wait,' he said, 'but Mr. Fletcher ought not to take the key. It is against the rules.'

To my relief Sir Guy then left me with the spectres which fret the unpractised liar.

That night I treated myself to a good dinner at a fashionable restaurant, and sought, in a sound bottle of Burgundy, the wholesome comfort to the conscience which lurks in the juice of the grape.

This lie must be lied out, then I would tell no more! Good resolutions often represent retrospective repentance. I remember walking down Piccadilly full of the peace of mind which accompanies the sin self-forgiven! The lie had become a very blameless counter necessary in diplomacy to oil the grooves of life.

If, however, instead of seeking comfort in Beaune I had consulted Lawrence, my conscience would never have strutted so insolently before the eyes of my indulgent soul.

On the following morning my punishment began —a punishment out of all proportion to an offence springing from unselfish motives.

When I arrived at the office Fletcher was not there as I expected. I commenced my work, but his signature represented a necessary link in the official routine, and the flow of business in the department was finally obstructed. The little dam of documents was visibly growing on Fletcher's table.

At a quarter to twelve Sir Guy Betts, accompanied by Byas, his secretary, came into the room.

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'What! Mr. Fletcher not here yet?'

'No, Sir Guy. But I feel sure he will be directly.'

My chief snorted and retired.

But at half-past one, as Fletcher was still absent, Sir Guy summoned me to his room. A flagrant error (Sir Guy called it an error) had been discovered in certain accounts for which Fletcher and I were responsible—an error on which the book I was supposed to keep was expected to throw light. Could I explain? No. Where was the book? In the safe. No doubt the discrepancy would easily be accounted for when Mr. Fletcher returned.

But Sir Guy was flustered.

'Surely both you and he couldn't have overlooked such a thing, Mr. Strood?'

'Mr. Fletcher kept the book, Sir Guy. He told me that you desired him to do so.'

'Mr. Strood!' he exclaimed angrily. 'You must be labouring under a delusion. Mr. Fletcher is incapable of such gross irregularity!'

But I insisted. Since I had been in the office I had never once made up the book in question.

Sir Guy was staggered. He had accepted Fletcher's figures because he imagined I checked them! Where was Mr. Fletcher? The poor man was becoming alarmed.

'Perhaps Mr. Fletcher is ill,' said Mr. Byas, the secretary, bridging over an ugly silence.

We sprang at this with a sense of delusive relief. Should I go to his rooms and see?

'Go at once,' said my chief. 'This is most improper and irregular.'

And then disaster seemed falling on me in fragments like stones down an Alpine slope before an

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avalanche. I took a hansom. Anxiety sat beside me. Piccadilly seemed full of spectres. My hand shook as I rang the bell.

The servant said, 'Mr. Fletcher has gone for a holiday.'

That was all I could learn beyond the fact that he had taken three portmanteaus and all his new clothes.

'When do you expect him back?' I gasped.

'Don't know, sir.'

The ugliest fears were now besetting me. The shield of whom or what had I become? Was I the accomplice of—I shuddered at the thought I dared not shape in words.

I drove back and ran into my room. Sir Guy Betts and Byas were there and the safe open!

'What do you mean by telling us, sir, that Mr. Fletcher had taken the key of the safe?'

In desperation I flung the raw truth at him!

'Mr. Fletcher wished no one to touch the papers and books under his charge till he returned, and asked me to say that he had taken the key with him.'

What poor wretch was speaking? Surely not honest John Strood. I did not recognise his voice.

Byas looked at me as though he had seen my hand in Sir Guy's pocket.

'This, sir,' said the secretary, looking up from the ledger on which he was pointing an inquisitorial finger, 'this, sir, is a serious business.'

'How?' I asked.

'Twelve hundred pounds are missing. Their loss has been carefully concealed by an ingenious system of book-keeping. Five ten-pound notes seem to have been taken from the cash-box yesterday.'

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There was no blood in my body—only a shuddering, ghostly ichor circulating at the panic-stricken point.

'I know nothing yet, sir—except that Mr. Fletcher lent me fifty pounds—for a friend.'

'"For a friend!" Good God!' cried Sir Guy, only one degree less horrified than myself.

Then I flung another ingredient into the squalid caldron bubbling about us.

'Fletcher has gone, and taken all his clothes with him; no one knows where.'

After that the mists seemed to gather round me. The heads of the various departments were summoned to Sir Guy's room, and to them I told my miserable story.

But why should I dwell on this deplorable scandal? Sifted, the horrible truth revealed its shameful head. Fletcher had falsified accounts in the books he kept, and twelve hundred pounds were missing.

The whole department seemed to reel under the stroke.

A thought struck me, suggested as such thoughts are by the instinct of self-preservation.

'Don't you think, sir,' I said to Sir Guy, 'that before taking any steps, Lord Scarbridge should be consulted. Possibly he can tell us where his brother-in-law has gone.'

'Anything to save the department and the country a scandal!' exclaimed my much stricken chief.

'I feel so sure that all can be explained!' I exclaimed, with a sickening effort to warm my own icy hopes.

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'I trust it may,' said poor Sir Guy, with difficulty maintaining his rigidity. 'Be here at ten o'clock to-morrow.'

When I reached my lodgings the panic which had been pursuing seized me. Of honourable escape I could see no way. I had been too near the crater of black transgression to escape unscathed. I had neglected my duties partly to save myself trouble, but chiefly because Fletcher's energetic will overruled mine. Already the thunders behind the department were rumbling. My head was among those which the bolt must strike. What must be done? I was ashamed to confess to my father. His wife would be called in! In my mind I heard his wavering appeals, saw the whole scene, and the eye of my step-dame sweeping the sad seas of my folly like an inexorable searchlight.

'Not to-night,' I thought, 'I'm too shaken.'

Then my thoughts rushed to Rivers, the only man I ever knew equally devoid of moral and physical fear. I ran out and sent a telegram, and afterwards—for I have no desire to hide my own weakness—made my way to a tavern off the Strand, well known to youths of literary and artistic leanings, and comforted myself with a pint of port. At midnight, when I reached home, to my astonishment I beheld Rivers sitting in the horsehair armchair before the fire waiting for me.

'I caught the last train from Elcombe,' he said, 'and have been here half an hour.' Then he looked at me intently—for my hair was rough, and, perhaps, my eye was glazed—and added, 'Courage, John, and face it like a man.'

'I dined,' I explained, 'at the Cock and Bull. I felt so miserable.'

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Lawrence was a water-drinker; possibly a faint reek of wine had entered the room with me.

'It's the worst sand to hide your head in, my poor John,' he said; 'but tell me, and we'll see what can be done.'

I told him, and as I relieved my soul of the burden, felt the weight of responsibility lightened.

'What,' I asked anxiously, 'do you think is the worst that can happen to me, Lawrence? They can't prove——' I felt my voice quaver when he checked me.

'No, no,' he said, 'but perhaps they'll ask you to resign. Your department seems very badly managed, John, but then,' he smiled indulgently, 'why shouldn't it be?'

'They were waiting till Sir Guy's pension was due,' I answered. 'Then it is to be reorganised. I was waiting for that in the hope of promotion. So was Fletcher!'

Here I'm afraid I sighed. Gradually my case was beginning to present itself to my mind as a pathetic one. I seemed the victim of my own amiable qualities rather than of those human weaknesses from which none of us are free. I was conscious of a tear in my eye.

'Don't, John!' exclaimed Rivers, irritated perhaps at my plaintive manner, for in the unaccustomed head a pint of wine may loose unexpected emotions; 'don't, John, it's silly.'

'I'm not,' I replied, 'I'm not really. But I seem to see a ruined career—that's all. It's most generous of you, Lawrence, to leave—what you have left—for my sake!'

'Diana urged me to come,' he said; 'personally I desired to defer it till to-morrow.'

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'How good of Mrs. Leighton!' I exclaimed. 'What did she say?'

'"Evidently poor Mr. Strood is in a blind panic!"' Lawrence replied. 'She also said you were one of those excellent fellows better fitted to manage other people's affairs than his own.'

Rivers here let in a narrow stream of light, and I perceived that, if there were a tragic side to my troubles, there were also absurd aspects.

'Of course I've acted like a fool,' I said, 'and deserve all I get. But if they kick me out, how am I to live? I'm ashamed to go to my father. My step-mother will declare I've disgraced the family. She always has tried to look on me as a fool, Lawrence, although you'll scarcely believe it! Now she'll have no difficulty in persuading herself (and my father, too, for the matter of that) that I'm a rogue as well! I can't look at that beastly horse-hair chair—the one you're sitting in—(the only things she ever gave me!) without feeling convinced that I've done for myself at home.'

At this Rivers rose from his chair and said:

'John! you are talking a little wildly. To-morrow we will see what can be done. I promise you that I'll stand by you. I gave you a push forward into this quagmire. The missing fifty pounds traced to you is very ugly. But go to bed. You will not think clearly until you've had a night's rest.'

He took my candle, lighted it for me, and wished me good night.

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CHAPTER IX

I AWOKE next morning with a start in the melancholy London dawn, falling from the easeful oblivion of sleep on to the rough edge of grimmest fact.

In the benumbed state of depression begotten of uncertainty, however, I found comfort in Lawrence Rivers, warming my own chilliness of soul at his abundant fires. Still it was no great consolation to learn that I was the victim of a rogue, not the accomplice! Dishonesty, I complained, was the most devastating of human iniquities—an offence involving other fates than its own! But Lawrence was patient, and after we had decided that he should accompany me to the office, see my credulous chief on my behalf, and entrust the compromising fifty pounds to his hands, gradually I found myself disclosing the other of my motives as a self-inflicted punishment for my folly.

'Then there 's my father,' I said.

'After we know the worst at the office, John,' he replied, 'we 'll see what can be done at home. If your father realises how far I helped to drag you into the mud, he 'll be ready to help brush it off when it 's dry.'

Then with a qualm I recalled my last visit to Arthur Place. It was the evening before the visit

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to Oxford. Warmed with pride, I had endeavoured to impress my stepmother with my own importance. 'You see,' I had thrown out carelessly, 'the Squire naturally wants to avail himself of my influence with his son. It will be used in the best interests of both.'

Where had all that sumptuous sense of self vanished?

My father's wife, impressed against her will, had condescended to say 'exactly!' But now I was creeping home under the protecting shadow of the youth whose guidance I had lately assumed, the victim of a predatory knave of whose patronage I had boasted!

There are, alas, certain natures which tempt us to be snobs!

'But, Lawrence,' I pleaded, 'think of the degradation of it! Just think!'

'My dear John,' he answered, 'why should you hope to be the one rogue-proof man in London? Fletcher's a subtle scamp!'

'That's the worst of it!' I said.

'Why the worst?' he asked.

'I was mean enough to be proud of him,' I groaned.

'You bragged of him to me,' he said.

'Yes, but from a different motive.'

Lawrence looked at me in some surprise.

'I don't quite see your meaning,' he said.

'I'll make it clear, then,' I exclaimed, 'whatever it costs me. Mrs. Strood is a lady very vulnerable to the glamour of great names.'

'What has that to do with it?' he asked.

'Ever since she married my father,' I confessed,

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'she has been anxious to keep me in what she considers my right place. This made me try to make her feel how much more important I was than she pretended to think!'

'That's all very mean and commonplace,' he said. 'When you dig human motives out they generally are!'

'I know,' I answered, 'but I 'm trying to ease my conscience by telling you.'

Then I rushed on my self-imposed ordeal, and told him how Fletcher had taken me to a ball at his sister's, and how, whenever my stepmother flourished fashionable names at me (as she constantly did when I dined at my father's), I hit her back by remembering I had met the owners of them in Grosvenor Square.

'But what was the good of it?' asked Rivers.

'It made her respect me in spite of herself,' I replied. 'I 'm not a snob as a rule, Lawrence, but my stepmother tempts me to be one. It 's the only means of fighting her on equal ground.'

It was here that Rivers paid me a great compliment—a compliment, indeed, partly consoling me for the journey through this valley of humiliation.

'You have,' said he, 'made a confession of which not one man in a hundred thousand is capable. I understand that it 's by way of atonement—a sacrifice made by the baser part of your conscience to the less ignoble side. My dear John, there 's much of the true Englishman in you, and not a little, too, of the modern Christian.'

Then he laughed and added, 'Perhaps you ought to be grateful to Fletcher for making you see the dirty sort of water at which you were quenching an unnatural thirst.'

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'But if you only knew my stepmother!' I pleaded.

'Perhaps I do,' he answered. 'She admires mean things and you try to outbid her. You have revealed yourself to me, John, as that rarest type of sinner—the repentant snob!'

After this extraordinary conversation, which, with any other man would have been impossible, but which Lawrence's limitless breadth of mind made inevitable, we proceeded together to the Ways and Means Department to confront Sir Guy Betts.

We found him sitting in his room supported by other elderly gentlemen in authority. I introduced Rivers, who at once made a favourable impression, fame having already touched him sufficiently with her magic finger for civil servants to know his name.

Mr. Battersby (sent across from the Treasury), who presided, heard him courteously. It was, he said, a most unfortunate occurrence, and one, he regretted to say, entirely compromising my position as a junior clerk.

'Not,' Lawrence interrupted warmly, 'on the side of honesty.'

'No,' replied the Treasury official blandly, 'but on the side of efficiency. Such irregularities cannot be overlooked.'

Here he glanced at Sir Guy at the opposite side of the table, who nodded assent.

'In that case,' I asked, 'what would you advise me to do?'

'The only thing left you, I fear,' replied my chief, 'is to send in your resignation and permit us to consider it.'

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'Exactly,' Mr. Battersby assented. 'The—eh—mistake would have been impossible if the rules of the department had been obeyed. Some sort of example must be made.'

At this Sir Guy Betts winced, and, turning to me, said, 'Mr. Strood! we need not detain you longer this morning,' and the interview ended.

'Come, John,' said Rivers as we turned into Parliament Street. 'At least you know the worst.'

'I am to send in my resignation, which will be accepted,' I assented.

We walked the slippery pavements in silence for some time. The traffic splashed the liquid mud across the footway, whilst the gloomy sky, lowering over the towers of Westminster behind us, and the trees in St. James's Park sweating in moist misery, encouraged within me the sense of impending disaster.

Suddenly Rivers, who had been deep in thought, turned to me, and said, 'John! go home and send in your resignation. I 'll call on your father and make the best of it. That loan was the finishing stroke. I feel that I 'm chiefly responsible; but for me you might have vegetated peacefully in the dim recesses of your department like a fungus under a beech-tree!'

'Never, Lawrence,' I protested, 'I 've too much energy. Perhaps it 's for the best. But meanwhile, if you would see my father and break the news, I should be grateful. You might make him understand that I needn't cost him more now than I did before. That 's an argument which will appeal to a man with a second family! You might also, Lawrence, promise him all the Rivers interest. If it comes to the worst tell him I 'll—I 'll enlist!'

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This desperate resolution was suggested by the mail-clad horsemen under their martial cloaks in the stone boxes at Whitehall.

When we reached Piccadilly Circus we separated, I finding my way to my lodgings, Lawrence Rivers driving to Arthur Place to make terms with my father. An hour later a cab drove up, and Rivers ran into my room where I was trying to read an article on the advantages of emigration written by a colonial agent in a popular magazine.

'You 'll find I 've made the best bargain I could,' he exclaimed, 'but I haven't a moment to spare. Your father is prepared to take a reasonable view of what has happened, if you 'll accept the terms.'

'What terms?' I exclaimed.

'They 'll tell you, man! I shall miss my train!'

I could see that the woman was drawing him like a magnet. 'O Diana Leighton!' I thought, 'you have much to answer for.'

He was hurrying down the dark musty staircase to the cab.

'One word more!' I cried after him. 'What of my stepmother?'

'You 'll find her,' he called back, 'in a forgiving state of mind. Good-bye!'

He jumped into the hansom and drove away.

It was not until I had seen my father (after another visit to the office and an unpleasant interview with Sir Guy Betts, who made it clear to me that I had been singled out as the one victim to be sacrificed to Fletcher's dishonesty) that I realised the extent of my friend's generosity. Critics have declared that, with all his gifts, Rivers had no sense of duty, and that self-gratification debased the whole

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of his career. But what will those blind guides think of his conduct to me.

My father lived in Arthur Place, in the smallest of the new houses built on a site once occupied by a mews where coachmen of the Regency had stabled their sleek horses, but from which red-brick and artistic porticos have banished the Georgian memories still lingering in the neighbouring streets.

These coquettish dwellings, suitable perhaps to the pretensions of an ambitious watering-place, take the sunshine and rain of Mayfair with an air of flippancy ill becoming the more dignified traditions which they have dispossessed.

My father's study overlooks the curve of the pavement. As I approached from the north I saw him standing at the window. He turned away and pretended not to see me.

No doubt the poor man had his misgivings too!

When I entered the room my stepmother was seated in the armchair by the fire. Even in the emergencies of life she occupied the least uncomfortable position for carrying on her campaigns. From the expression on the face of both I inferred that she had been stiffening her husband's courage, and prepared myself to fight, uncertain at first whether to present a front of jaunty defiance or of philosophic resignation to the foes in half-hearted alliance against me.

'Well, sir!' began my father.

'This is a deplorable business, John,' put in his wife.

'Deplorable!' I assented. 'But I needn't tell you what a relief it is to feel it isn't my fault!'

'Your father has been to the office, John,'

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returned my stepmother. 'Tell him what they said, dear!'

She fixed a keen eye on her husband.

'They told me,' replied my father gloomily, 'that the whole thing was due to your culpable neglect of duty!'

'You don't mean to tell me, sir, that you believe that?' I answered.

'Believe it!' exclaimed my stepmother, 'what else could he believe?'

'Your chief further pointed out to me, John,' resumed my father, 'that the thing couldn't be overlooked, and that you 'd have to go!'

'To go? Of course I shall. But poor old Sir Guy! how badly he wants a scapegoat! His absurd confidence in Fletcher was the sole cause of the trouble.'

'"Trouble"!' repeated my stepmother; 'let us call things by their right names — robbery, you mean!'

'Never mind that,' interposed my father quickly. 'What do you expect will happen, John? Will there be a big scandal?'

'No,' said I. 'It will all dwindle down to an error in accounts. Lord Scarbridge will be permitted to set that straight. Fletcher will disappear under the same august influences which brought him forward! The whole business will be discreetly hushed up for the public benefit.'

'But what of you?' asked my stepmother.

'I 'm the necessary victim. The department prides itself on its leniency in permitting me to resign! There 's no pension for me!'

'I 'm not so sure!' said my father.

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'Why, what do you mean?' I asked.

'Hasn't Lawrence Rivers told you?' said my stepmother. 'Anything more generous I never heard!'

'Lawrence,' I answered, 'told me before he went that he had made the best bargain for me that he could.'

As I spoke, I turned on my stepmother as much of my shoulder as I dared, in order to suggest that her views of my conduct left my equanimity unmoved. What I heard made me forget even my resentment!

'Young Rivers says,' returned my father, 'that, since he is responsible for your dismissal, it's his duty to make up to you for it. He proposes, therefore, to settle on you in compensation a sum sufficient to give you two hundred a year for five years.'

'In other words,' interposed my stepmother, 'he's making you a present of a thousand pounds!'

I found myself floundering in a stream of bewilderment.

'Why didn't he tell me!' I exclaimed.

'Because he was afraid you'd be silly enough to refuse!' cried my stepmother. 'He is a son any woman may be proud of.'

This shot at me I let pass.

'Where's the money coming from?' I asked.

'My old firm will see to that,' said my father. 'Some arrangement will have to be made with the Squire. I have written to Lincoln's Inn Fields to see what can be done.'

'I can't take it!' I said in a burst of sincerity. 'They'd have kicked me out whether I borrowed the money or not.'

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CHAPTER X

IN the negotiations which now opened between the Squire and his son, Strood, Muirhead and King—our name still gave a certain prestige to the firm—played an important part. My father, for once bestirring himself, went down to Beckstone to discuss matters with the Squire. Fortunately some property, left by the late Mrs. Rivers, afforded the basis for a bargain. At first the Squire obstinately refused to yield a point. He would be hanged if the young fool got a penny if he could prevent it! But even parental anger gives way to self-interest. Concessions connected with his mother's estate which young Rivers was empowered to make under certain clauses of her will would considerably increase his father's present income. The understanding, I regret to say, was not without a squalid side. Finally, in spite of his smouldering resentment, the Squire accepted the terms offered, and, finding himself unable to prevent his son from raising funds on his reversion in other directions, signed an agreement entitling him to an income adequate to his position as his heir to the Beckstone estates.

When this arrangement was definitely settled he sent for me. We met at his club. He had heard of my dismissal and the reasons for it, but not of the compensation which Lawrence proposed to make

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whenever the command of money permitted him to give the reins to his (in this case) most reasonable generosity.

The Squire stood with his back to the fire, big, burly, and bluff, looking at me suspiciously with his little twinkling eyes.

'Strood,' said he, 'I understand my son got you kicked out of your office. It's like him! Everything he touches turns to mischief!'

'I had to resign,' I answered. 'No one is to blame except the system which wanted a victim.'

'Nonsense!' returned the Squire. 'You ought to have come to me.'

'The — eh — unfortunate misunderstanding,' I pleaded, 'prevented me from—eh——'

Whilst I was hesitating for a suitable phrase he cut me short.

'Don't talk to me, young Strood! Misunderstanding? Am I to see my son get himself kicked out of his College and advertising himself all over the country at the skirts of a married woman old enough to be his mother, and take it sitting down?'

'Of course you've every right to say what you think, sir, but——'

But he refused to hear me.

'No flabby talk, Strood! Just listen to what I've to say. What do you suppose will come of this business with Mrs. Leighton?'

'I don't know, sir?'

'Nobody else does either. He can't marry her if he wanted to. Leighton will take good care of that! She's ten years older than he is. In the natural course of things he'll get tired first. I

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don't want to see him making a fool of himself, and I'm even now prepared to meet him half-way.'

'In this case, sir,' I replied, 'there's no half-way!'

'Don't you believe it, youngster. I tell you there is! To break off an affair of this kind in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred is only a question of a big enough cheque. Tell Lawrence from me that, if he'll cut this disreputable business and drop the woman, I'll bear the whole expense. This is my last offer—and a damned liberal one, too. Then—for they tell me the chap's clever, although I don't believe it!—if he'll behave decently and go into law or politics or something becoming his class—not scribbling and sentimentalising and all that rubbish—well, then, I'll put matters at Beckstone on a footing to which even his confounded impudence can't object.'

The light flashed on me. The Squire meant that if the son would give up Mrs. Leighton that Mrs. Dalzell would cease to appear in Beckstone Park.

'D'you understand?' asked the Squire.

'Perfectly,' I replied. 'It's . . . it's . . . generous!'

'I should think it was! Tell him I want to see him decently married. I can't live for ever. After all, he's my heir—for want of a better. What's the good of his throwing his chances away among a lot of literary men and demireps? If the fellow had only been a sportsman instead of a poet, I'd have forgiven him anything. I'm old enough to remember the silly talk about Byron. How sick it used to make my father!'

'Pardon me, sir,' I here interposed, 'but you don't do Lawrence justice, indeed you don't! His—eh—connection with Mrs. Leighton, I assure you, is not

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of the character you think. She is a high-minded and honourable woman, profoundly anxious about his career.'

'No sentimental nonsense, if you please, sir,' cried the Squire angrily. 'It's wasted on me. The whole thing's a pose! If their ages were reversed there might be some excuse for it, but as it is it's only cheap cant. In my day a woman who went wrong was a sinner; now she's only a vestal virgin out of place! Bah!'

And the Squire walked up and down the empty smoking-room twice before his anger was sufficiently cooled for him to continue the conversation. 'The last time I sent you to my son,' he resumed after a pause, 'I said the message was final. I've decided, however, to give him another chance. Tell him, if he'll drop that confounded woman, that I'll put things at Beckstone on such a—eh—well, footing as will satisfy even his airs and graces! If he won't accept these terms tell him he may go to the deuce as fast as he likes, and that he shan't touch a penny more of my money than the entail entitles him to! He'll have to let Beckstone! Have I made myself clear?'

There are some men born with claims on our obedience which others like myself instinctively accept; of these the Squire of Beckstone was one. It seemed to me that he had a bull-like right to graze in his own fields. His invitation to Lawrence to browse there on equal terms was not illiberal. 'At last,' I thought, 'the old man is beginning to recognise the merits of his son,' and I left him with an increased sense of regret.

On the following day the visit to Elcombe came

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to an end. Mrs. Leighton returned to her flat in Kensington: Lawrence took up his quarters with me.

The few days I now spent with him in the closest intimacy made me feel, widely as we were separated by temperament, talents, and ambition, that nature intended me for his biographer. Some men are born to shine, others to reflect their rays. This may have been my case. At any rate I am prepared to accept the contempt of those who cannot see nobler causes for my apparent weakness than a desire to lie under the shadow of a stronger character. Lawrence's nature fascinated mine, especially on the side of intellectual curiosity. It was at this time that I fell beyond escape under the spell of a man who, however women may have influenced him, never, in his dealings with the world, needed the support of other courage than his own.

Moreover, his extraordinary delicacy had bound me to him by a new tie. Did he really expect me to act as his secretary? Of this I have never been quite sure. When I accepted, or rather when I claimed the post, certainly he had no need of me, and I, moreover, suspected that Diana Leighton disapproved of the arrangement. The aim of this beautiful if unscrupulous woman at this time was to maintain her influence over my friend, an object which my solicitude for Lawrence's future compelled me to oppose. Perhaps the flicker of embarrassment on his face, when we met after his return from Surrey, was due to her power.

'My dear fellow,' he exclaimed, 'what on earth am I to do with a secretary?'

'Wait and see,' said I, 'the longer you live the more you'll want one. Even your father sees that,

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whether you mean it or not, weight of circumstance will compel you to be a public man.'

This made him serious.

'You 've seen my father, then?' he asked eagerly.

'He sent for me,' I answered, 'and this is what he said.'

Then, as delicately as I could, passing as lightly over the reflections on Diana Leighton as possible, I gave the Squire's message.

At first Rivers, perhaps wilfully, refused to grasp its meaning, compelling me to repeat it undimmed by euphemisms.

'Your father,' I said bluntly, 'seems to think you 're in the toils of a designing woman. If money 's necessary to help you escape he is ready to provide it.'

I still recall his look of disgust. My words had dragged down a romance to the gutter.

'And you consented to bring me such a message!' he cried.

'What could I do? He is an old man without imagination enough to make allowances. Besides, you had to know.'

'You see excuses for my father, then?' he replied.

'Excuses, no—that is, yes—there 's a certain—something—on his side one must see. Your friendship with Diana Leighton may be as innocent as it is possible for such relations to be, Lawrence, but can you expect the world your father represents to see it in that light? I assured him that Diana Leighton was a high-minded, unselfish woman, profoundly anxious that your career should be a worthy one. But he scoffed at the idea. If, he said, your ages were reversed there might be something in it, as it

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was he saw nothing but cant. In his day, he declared, a woman who "went wrong" was regarded as a sinner. Now she's looked upon—he meant, Lawrence, among the people who admire you—as "a vestal virgin out of place"—his very words.'

'And you let him say so, John?' Rivers asked, white with indignation.

'I had to. It was he who refused to listen to me. After all, there is his side to the question.'

Then there was a pause. Lawrence remained in deep thought. It seemed to me that he was plunging beneath the surface of things for the motives below.

'I'm to drink at a very filthy stream,' he said at last. 'Do you know, John, you've missed his real meaning.'

'I think not,' I answered. 'You're to decide whether you'll give up Diana Leighton or him for —well, for what he's giving up.'

'Just reflect for a moment,' he said. 'My father had to be driven and bribed before he consented to come to an arrangement with me. Where's the spirit of indulgent reason which you are trying to see behind his conduct here, John? You little understand him. His offer is a move in a cunning game. Behind the bluff prejudices of a sporting squire, all you and others see, the most inveterate malice is concealed. I am the one being whom he has never been able to frighten or subdue. The proposal he has made through you is only one more move in the unnatural quarrel between us. It's a brutal blow. It takes for granted that my relations with Diana Leighton are unspeakable; that the beauty and tenderness of her character, her generous

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unselfishness, her dazzling gifts are the common equipment of vulgar and greedy harpies who batten on the credulity of young men. He makes me a self-indulgent fool, Diana a creature of the basest instincts; he ignores all that is best in the souls of men and women whom the white light has touched. Can you doubt what my answer must be?'

'But surely, Lawrence,' I protested, 'you don't imagine that your father said what he did with the object of insulting you and lowering Diana Leighton in your eyes.'

'Yes, I do,' said he.

'You are wrong, Lawrence,' I went on. 'I'm convinced you are. There is a strange perversity which compels you to see behind human clumsiness motives which are not there. You grope in the depths for what is floating on the surface. Your father's proposal, after all, is one which nine men out of a hundred would make to their sons under the circumstances. You are too subtle. No man respects you more than myself; forgive me if I'm not blind to your weaknesses.'

'Is it a weakness,' he asked, 'to see more clearly into your own affairs than others can? I understand my father as no other man possibly can. But what you mistake for a clumsy effort at reconciliation is in reality a stroke of spite. When I was a child I have known him turn the same base weapon against my mother. But we've said enough. I will write to my father. A house divided against itself such as ours is safer without an intermediary!'

Then he left the room, and we did not meet again till night. Probably he called on Diana Leighton—for he kept no secrets from her—and I suspect that

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the letter to his father was inspired by counsels given by that strangely fascinating woman.

It was now clear to me that, if I hoped to enjoy Lawrence's confidence, I must adopt some consistent policy, for I could not help fearing that the man who had not hesitated to sacrifice his father for a woman would, with even less compunction, for her sake throw over a friend. In spite of his keen intellect Rivers was open to impressions that left less imaginative men untouched. If, therefore, Diana Leighton's influence were destined to continue, it would be well for me to endeavour to direct it wisely. A woman who is a selfish fool is unmanageable when her weakness has centred her happiness on the constancy of one man. Her lover's friends, if they thwart her whims, are made the object of her jealous suspicions. They are tolerated only so long as their flattery is pitched in the right key.

But however little Diana Leighton allowed reason to guide her, she was no ignoble soul. It is difficult for a man to be sure what a woman thinks of him. Still I had reason to hope that she respected my loyalty. My unselfish anxiety for Lawrence's future, therefore, at least afforded room for our rival claims. Moreover, if I were secretly jealous of her influence (which I was only so far as I feared it might jeopardise his career), there was no reason why a woman of her intelligence and knowledge of the world should dread the effect of mine. It was true that when I first saw her I had been rash enough to give her a warning; but the strain of magnanimity which ran through her character had prevented her from telling Lawrence what I had said. She might have stabbed me in the back; she spared me because she believed

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in the sincerity of my friendship. My fears on Lawrence's behalf, therefore, were modified by a reluctant respect for her character, as well as by my admiration for her beauty. What sort of alliance, then, was possible between us? I determined to see.

Soon after this talk with Lawrence I called on Mrs. Leighton whom I found in the little drawing-room overlooking the colourless quadrangle formed by the group of buildings which had lately sprung up on the site of an old orchard garden near Kensington High Street.

Our conversation opened in a neutral key.

'What melancholy prospects people who live in London are content to look on,' she said, when I had found a seat facing the window.

'Once,' I replied, glancing out into the arid court-yard still grey with the dust of recent building operations, 'once an old mulberry-tree stood there. I remember when I was a boy—we lived on Campden Hill—seeing the lawn stained with the red berries pecked by the thrushes.'

These childish memories I intended to provoke her sympathy.

'They might have left the tree,' she said.

Then there was a short silence. She was waiting for me to begin.

'How is Sylvia?' I asked. Sylvia was her little girl aged eight. 'I've heard so much of her from Lawrence' (this was true), 'but have never seen her.'

'She's in the Gardens with nurse,' she said. 'She is fond of Lawrence.'

'He's devoted to children,' said I.

'He's devoted to Sylvia,' said she.

'Is that Sylvia?' I asked, glancing at the photo-

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graph of a pretty child in a white frock, with a bow in her hair.

'Yes.'

'What a darling!'

I don't know whether this was tact, but it was intended for it. Bent on conciliating the mother, I knew no better path than the ancient way.

'Lawrence,' I continued, 'has such a happy way of winning confidence.'

But she looked at me quietly, and her eyes seemed to say, 'What are you driving at?'

I made a rush for it.

'What has happened,' I resumed—'I mean my bad luck at the Ways and Means Department—has made a great change in my life, Mrs. Leighton. My intimacy with Lawrence now promises to be greater than ever. You know he has appointed me his secretary. Of course there 's not much for me to do yet, but there will be soon, for nothing, I 'm convinced, can keep him out of public life.. I was of some use to him in the Finck campaign. Perhaps it was that that made him think of it.'

'His desire to confer a benefit in the least unacceptable manner had, I think, still more to do with it,' she answered firmly.

I felt the stroke.

'I know,' I answered; 'still I 'm only copying Lawrence's methods in sparing my own pride. He did his best to compensate me; I 'm doing my best to compensate myself! Forgive me, if you can, Mrs. Leighton.'

Her smile dismissed my nervousness.

'Sometimes,' she said, 'you seem to understand him.'

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'I must try to if we're to get on, I replied; 'but none of us can be sure we're right in judging others. Do you remember the last time we met?'

'Yes. At Oxford,' she replied.

'If you had repeated what I said then Lawrence would never have trusted me again. His friendship would have been lost to me. But you were magnanimous, Mrs. Leighton. You spared me. It seems to me that I'm intended to be Lawrence's friend. He is surrounded by a hundred dangers that he can't see——'

'That he despises, you mean,' she broke in.

'No, no,' I replied hastily. 'It isn't that—at least not exactly. I simply mean this. Lawrence is a man of genius, I'm a man of—may I say business?—with a romantic side. His is the rarest nature I have ever met. You know, Mrs. Leighton, what sacrifices I have already made in the cause of this friendship. Such a man as Lawrence is not intended for you or for me; a side of him—perhaps not the side we see and love—must be given to the world. Your power over him is now the strongest influence in his life. Don't use it to brush me out of the way. Why cannot we be allies? No man needs unselfish friends more than Lawrence will. There are many ways in which I can help him, and you too. I've come here to-day to offer you all I have to give.'

She watched me with the deepest interest.

'In such a bargain,' she said, 'a woman cannot say what she thinks.'

'Leave me to guess it, then,' I answered. 'Because I love Lawrence, I ask you to let me be your friend.'

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She held out her hand with a generous look in her eyes. I raised it to my lips and kissed it.

In this movement a cold-blooded critic may see evidence of a theatrical nature, but I give my word of honour that no man ever kissed a lady's hand with more simple honesty of purpose than I did Diana Leighton's.

'Thank you with all my heart,' I said, 'for trusting me. You shall never repent it.'

Then I left her.

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CHAPTER XI

THE lives of few men bear microscopic inspection. In our struggle to attain happiness most of us are compelled to crawl through dark places whither malice follows us. Dignity presents to the world only one side of us. But there is another side, suspected by our friends and denounced by our enemies, but only known to our secret thoughts. The hidden springs of conduct are not easily traced to their sources. Respect for humanity forbids us exploring too ruthlessly. Charity should guide the judgment of friendship. I am, therefore, compelled to pass lightly over the relations of Diana Leighton and Lawrence Rivers, partly because to judge them in cold blood as a not uncommon problem of life would be misleading, but chiefly because one who admired the character of both as deeply as I did, dreads lest his careless handling may shift their story to the vulgar plane of intrigue. I was, moreover, sedulously kept outside a secret which I had no right to share. Naturally I formed my own opinion.

Leighton, from whom his wife was separated by the consent of both, refused her the liberty she claimed. Faint whispers of renewed negotiations now reached me. 'One never knew how a woman might change her mind!' Leighton is reputed to have said. He for one was determined not to give

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his wife a chance of a second mistake. Of this situation Diana Leighton tried to make the best. Without denying herself the pleasure of constantly seeing Lawrence, she now resolved that the world which began more and more to fix its eyes on the brilliant young man should have as little visible cause as possible for censure. Knowing her position and her temptations, her friends, who were many, were charitable ; but no shield could save her from the malice of vulgar minds.

It was not till the spring of the following year that Rivers's affairs were settled, and that he was able to assume in London the position to which his prospects and talents entitled him. My duties as his secretary, hitherto nominal, now became regular. Lawrence took chambers near Whitehall on the Thames Embankment, overlooking the river. In order to be near him, I found a couple of rooms sharing a similar prospect in a decayed but still imposing house in Adelphi Terrace.

Here, one bright April morning, just as I had breakfasted, he came to see me in answer to a letter written the day before, in which I had said, half playfully, yet with a sense of purposeful earnestness, that since I was receiving his pay, he must let me 'pull my weight in his boat.'

He stood by the window and looked out on the river. The tide, nearly high, was still flowing. A line of barges laden with fodder followed in the foaming wake of a squat and sturdy tug. The sun shone on the edge of the froth curling from the clumsy hulls, the anchored craft on the Surrey side rocked in the swell. In the smoke-stained mists above three gulls were wheeling. Beneath their

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wings the murmur of London floated like the breathing of a monster endowed with half articulate life.

'What a view!' I exclaimed, little thinking the impression he was gathering would be embodied in his wonderful poem 'London,' published a few weeks later in the *Three Kingdoms' Review.*

'Magnificent,' he answered. Then he quoted:

'"Calm was the day and through the trembling air
Sweet breathing Zephyrus did softly play."'

'Spenser's "Prothalamion"?' I inquired, proud of my knowledge.

He nodded thoughtfully, his face bent on the shining glories of the river. 'The governess made me learn the poem before I was sent to school. It goes on, you know—

'"At length they all to merry London came,
To merry London, my most kindly nurse."

'Who would think of calling London "merry" now? Yet Spenser was right. The sea-gulls up there in the smoke wreaths feel it. There! I heard one call—

'"Sweet Thames! run softly, till I end my song."'

'You mustn't think of ending it yet, Lawrence,' said I. 'The public is only just beginning to listen.'

I was thinking of the book of poems which was to appear next week under the title (Diana Leighton had suggested it) of *Cypress and Apple Blossom.*

'There are worse sacrifices to our vanity than occasional verse,' he said. 'But never mind that, John. I've come to say that if you're so bent on

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"pulling your weight" in my boat, that you're likely to have a good chance of splashing before long.'

'How?' I asked.

'You've heard of Enfield Blythe?'

Of course I had. His name was never out of the papers.

'The agitator, reformer, or whatever he is?' I asked. 'The man the Nonconformist papers call the "Friend of Righteousness"?'

'Yes. But even the newspapers can't make him ridiculous. You know, John, I've been thinking of trying to get into the House. Harold Syme, who is member for Redburn, talks of retiring. He has had enough of it, and thinks I might trot in in his cast-off shoes. Blythe is dead against it. The man who buries himself in the House of Commons, he says, is "done for." He ends in becoming "a melancholy unit in a commonplace mob!" His convictions change "into bloodless dogmas in a dull game where nothing counts except heads!"'

Here I protested, for it had been my ambition to see Rivers in Parliament. Blythe, I said, who had tried practical politics and failed, was no authority on them. You might, I argued, as well try to wake people up by tracts as by Anti-Greed Leagues.

But Lawrence pulled me up.

'John,' he said, 'you are one of the men who expect a reward for all human effort. Parliament is the *panache* of the middle-class mind.'

Then to test him, I said: 'We are a dull people, so we have a stodgy Parliament. It serves our purpose and reflects the national temperament.'

'My poor John,' he answered, 'you've eaten of

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the root which blinds the understanding. Does it even reflect yours?'

'Pale parts of it do, Lawrence. I take what it gives because it's the best it has.'

'"The best it has!"' he repeated scornfully. 'We accept the second best in everything—in literature, art, and thought. Parliament is the temple where sacrifices are made to mediocrity. The God of "the man in the street" is its divinity. The only theologies it teaches are new means of acquiring wealth!'

'Well, we're compelled to,' I insisted. 'Unless we are cunning and sharpen our teeth and claws our rivals will eat our heads off.'

'O worshipper of the great Grocer God!' he exclaimed, 'your leaders would make life a bagman's playground. War all over the world would be a thousand times less brutalising.'

'Don't you hear the curlews calling over Locksley Hall, Lawrence?' I here asked slyly.

He laughed.

'Let them call then!' he answered. 'The main fact about English life at the present moment is that dullness gets to the top. *La carrière est ouverte à la bêtise!* Low-thinking and high-living are the result. But underneath all this is a great inarticulate spirit—the spirit of the race which produced Shakespeare, Shelley, and Nelson, the spirit which has flung incomparable lights on the darkness of the world. To-day we're ruled by second-class minds and a press to match. The result is an amorphous force which, for want of a better name, we call public opinion—a thing of threads and patches. Do you mean to tell me, John, that England can produce nothing better than this?'

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'I 'm not sure,' I said.

'I am. Whilst the scum on the top is worshipping successful greed, somewhere under the surface are glowing the same fires which made England the England of our poets!'

'"This happy breed of men, this little world,"'

I quoted ironically,

'"This precious stone set in the silver sea!"'

'I 'm a little tired of the alliteration,' he answered.

'Perhaps we have had it too often,' I assented; 'but you forget, Lawrence, that the English people have their religion.'

'Had, you mean. They've only the husks left.'

'Fairly solid husks, all the same,' I urged. 'In any case, discontent with what we see about us isn't a policy.'

'But it might easily become the spur of one,' he replied. 'Enfield Blythe is leaving his League. He has written to me to ask me to take his place.'

'But the Anti-Greed League is absurd,' I insisted.

'Absurd, possibly, but if Englishmen are to continue to be a ruling race, they must learn the duties of the highest citizenship. Enfield Blythe's mistake was to begin at the wrong end.'

'You mean,' I said, 'with the masses?'

'Yes. The "poor blind mouths" can only be touched by example. Their only ideals are, and must be, to appease their hunger. The problem is to save the classes from the greedy rich who are tempting them to go to the devil by the meanest roads.'

'Then,' said I, now deeply interested, 'you have some sort of a policy?'

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'Yes,' he repeated, 'the policy of the Higher Citizenship.'

Nothing, he went on to explain, could be more remote from practical issues than the pursuit of the Higher Citizenship. A seat in the House of Commons could not promote that. The sense of the civic virtues only awakens at critical moments in the national life. It blossomed at the time of the Spanish Armada, unless foolish professors had taught him history in vain; it was active during the agony of the Napoleonic wars. But after 1815, under the narcotic of easy prosperity, this sense went to sleep, and though its slumbers have been troubled by dreams whenever nervous national shouts have disturbed its quiet, no trumpets have ever been loud enough to awaken the people, whether blown by poet, philosopher, or divine. Whether this slumber represented senile atrophy or national dullness the future alone would show, meanwhile it was the duty of every man with a soul above the flesh-pots and the money-bags to try to rouse the dull giant into activity. There were many who thought as he did: collectively their shoutings might effect something, but in the scattered cries of scolding and expostulation the voices were wasted. You might as well explode crackers to burst a rain-cloud! In organised effort, in a volume of effort, deep, penetrating, and sincere, lay the only hope.

Thus Lawrence Rivers explained his views while I listened. It was this conversation that sunny April morning to which the movement that he finally led was due.

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CHAPTER XII

THE publication of *Cypress and Apple Blossom* gave Lawrence Rivers, 'among those of his contemporaries who had chosen verse for their medium of expression, the place his originality, his courage, his lyrical powers, and his many gifts undoubtedly deserved.' This quotation from the article in the *Trimestrial Review* was one of the many which, intended to flatter, greatly annoyed Rivers.

'They've said it of a dozen other writers within the last three years,' he complained.

This was ungrateful, for to no man were the newspapers a better friend. All of them discovered in his work 'a modern note struck by none of his rivals.' His now famous 'Ode to the Great Grocer God,' a vulgar divinity created by Rivers to ridicule the profit-and-loss theories of life, hit the public like a hammer. 'Never was satire more vigorous or deserved condensed into briefer space!' exclaimed one admiring critic. 'Here,' he added, '*Saeva Indignatio* shows all her shining teeth!'

By a fortunate accident the book appeared in the same week as the notorious case ended in which the directors of the Cosmopolitan Stores Company were acquitted of fraud on the grounds of ignorance and incompetency. A leading journal, under a severely worded article suggesting a miscarriage of justice,

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printed the poem to enforce the moral it was striving to teach. A run on the book was the result. In four weeks ten thousand copies were sold. Lawrence had now become, in the words of the leader-writers who provide the public with phrases he loathed, 'a force to be reckoned with.'

A number of causes were working to encourage the little group of agitators 'suffering,' as the cynics constantly repeated, 'on the political side from the artistic temperament,' to make a collective effort to spread the doctrines of the Higher Citizenship. I saw the seed sown, and I saw the sower at work. During eighteen months 'it was my privilege'—there's a sad echo in the words now—to act as secretary to the association derided by scoffers as the 'Anti-Greed League,' of which Rivers was the moving spirit. At the offices of our 'League of the Higher Citizenship' I sat daily from 10 to 5 (Saturdays excepted), answering letters, distributing our 'literature,' arranging lectures. Earnest men all over the country began to support us. At some points we even stirred the 'serious people,' for the churches and chapels, suspecting that we were trespassing on their domains, entered into some sort of alliance with us. We were, they said, seeking the same object by different roads. Might not better results be obtained if we worked together? This question was put at the meeting in Exeter Hall, where the Bishop of Buckwater took the chair, supported by Dr. Hendon Barker and other 'leading lights of Nonconformity.' It was thus that what was at first a purely secular movement acquired an ecclesiastical wing. It was to this alliance and the controversy which resulted from it that the League

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acquired its national importance. The secret history of the quarrel I now propose to tell as simply and fairly as affection for my friend and esteem for Diana Leighton allow. Let no public man say he is secure till he is safely married, is the lesson taught by this portion of Lawrence's life.

The situation was now briefly this. Rivers was still under the influence of Diana Leighton. He made no decision and took no step without consulting her. She acted, as he once said to me, as another half of his brain, stirring him into activity and suggesting issues for his pent-up thoughts.

All profound intimacies springing in the first instances from passions, emotions, instincts, affections, or from whatever combined sources love grows, must be affected by time. The erosion of three years which had passed since Lawrence Rivers left Oxford had made his mind more tolerant and his will less rash. There are insistent facts which we prefer to consider as non-existent although we grow daily more conscious of their influence.

Three years, three steps from the golden centre of youth, had left their mark on Diana Leighton. There were streaks of grey in her thick brown hair; the look of anxiety in her eyes had grown deeper. To me she seemed as beautiful as ever, but Lawrence Rivers, generous and chivalrous as he was, had come under Diana's spell when he was a boy. Possibly something had ripened in him prematurely. Neither artifice nor culture drive out nature. The change is there though we refuse to recognise it.

'Nothing lasts but friendship,' I heard him once tell her. 'Time wears out every other sentiment.'

As he spoke, the scared look grew in Diana's

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eyes, and I felt that he had flashed on her one of those warning signals which precede a storm.

'*Tout casse*,' she replied, '*tout lasse, tout passe !*'

'Yes,' he repeated, 'except friendship.'

Were new claims, I wondered, gradually unloosing this predominant tie? Was the disparity of their years making itself felt? There are streams which the strongest swimmer cannot stem. Lawrence Rivers was a man for whom temptations lurked at every turn of his brilliant path. His incommunicable power of attraction—a power of which he was himself unconscious, for vanity never laid its ugly finger on him—grew with his growing flame. On one side was a young and singularly handsome man, a poet of fearless character and lavish endowments, the driving force of the National Idealist movement although born in the impressive centre of territorial dignity and opulence; on the other a greedy world anxious to stifle him with its flattering incense. Society might laugh at Rivers for 'what he was trying to do,' but who could despise him? The social side of his popularity, always great, had grown with the fashion of the moment. It was here that Diana Leighton's kingdom was first threatened. Could she expect a man eight years her junior permanently to acknowledge such a sway as hers? As I looked on from without at the movements stirring about them, uncertain whither they were being borne, I doubted. Diana had made a friend of me, at first perhaps because it was wise, but finally because she liked me. Was I not as far as possible in the confidence of both? But in the affairs of men and women who knows where conflict begins or jealousy stirs?

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After the first 'infatuation' as her friends called it, Diana Leighton, finding that her husband refused to give her the release which her conduct claimed, altered her attitude towards the world. Whatever she may have felt for Lawrence Rivers she strove to hide under a platonic veil.

Might not a clever woman help to the utmost a young man of acknowledged genius many years her junior without incurring the censure of society?

Was the man her lover or was he not?

The women who liked her—and she had many friends—said 'No.' What the others said I need not repeat. The entanglement, however, was an obstacle to Lawrence's career which his friends thought unnecessary. These critics Diana Leighton was determined as far as possible to disarm. Her caution grew as he came more prominently under the public gaze. What may be overlooked in a lyrical poet is less easily pardoned in the conduct of a national idealist, and the malicious did not fail to wonder how far the ethics of the Higher Citizenship were practicable in Lawrence's relations with the lady with whom his name was constantly associated.

An intrigue, they said, was an intrigue however dexterously managed. Lawrence Rivers was not only a poet and a social reformer, he was also heir to the Squire of Beckstone, and, in spite of himself, a man of fashion. Society, as time went on, began to wonder why 'Rivers didn't marry.'

'You had better ask Diana Leighton,' answered the scornful.

Here was the weak point in his position.

Among these voices one of the shrillest was my stepmother's, who put the worst construction on

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what she had heard from my father. No one had 'a greater horror of irregularities' than this lady of stern principles. We had all, she said (and she said it too often) an example to set. From the man bent on teaching the duties of the Higher Citizenship we had a right to expect a blameless life.

Of course I protested. My stepmother's reply suggested that I was paid to do so. 'Naturally you're on Lawrence Rivers's side, John,' she said, 'but then I know what the Squire thinks.'

'The Squire thinks just what he wants to think,' I replied. 'I only see two kindred spirits working in a great cause.'

Here my stepmother smiled.

'It's a pity they're of different sex,' she said. 'As you know, John, I'm as anxious as you to make the best of it. Don't I call on Mrs. Leighton for your sake? Still, as a wife and a mother, I doubt whether I'm justified.'

'Justified!' I retorted indignantly.

'Yes, John, justified,' she repeated. 'There's a price for all irregularities, and I'm afraid I'm not doing my duty to society in helping this woman shirk hers. Either a woman's reputation is above suspicion or it is not. The world I see about me, John, isn't one which can afford to relax its moral standards to suit the convenience of certain men.'

'If,' I retorted, 'we are to measure the conduct of such a man as Lawrence by the standard set up for the governess and the curate, we may as well pull down the blinds at once. Rivers is a man of extraordinary gifts. Diana Leighton was the first to see and encourage them. We've no right to seek baser motives than these.'

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'Mrs. Leighton came between the Squire and his son,' said my stepmother. 'No really good woman would have done this.'

'You can't sacrifice everything to an old man's prejudices,' I replied. 'Besides the Squire is outwardly reconciled.'

'Why, John?' she inquired maliciously.

'Why? Because Lawrence's reputation gives the Squire a sort of reflected glory,' I replied with conviction.

'That's not a fair thing to say of the Squire. As he said the other day, "You can't expect me, Mrs. Strood, to throw the first stone simply because my son has got into the hands of a designing woman."'

'Did he say "designing woman"?' I asked suspiciously.

'No, his language was much coarser, but it is what he meant.'

I here inferred that my stepmother was accustomed to ingratiate herself with the Squire by abusing Diana Leighton. Nettled at this I shot the usual arrow and declared that women were jealous of Diana Leighton's influence over Lawrence.

'Jealous, John!' she retorted angrily. 'What paltry nonsense! As though any honest woman would be proud of that sort of influence over any man! Fortunately it is an influence that can't last. She's ten years older than he is. Unless she dyes her hair, as I suspect she will, she'll be grey in a couple of years. How much will you give for her influence then? Don't talk to me! I know what men are—and women, too, for the matter of that.'

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Here I fled and left her master of the field.

The battle showed to what malice Diana was exposed.

Unluckily the relations of Lawrence and Diana Leighton had a morbid attraction for my step-mother that made itself felt beyond the domestic circle which her own example kept so pure.

Some months after the famous meeting in Exeter Hall where the League of the Higher Citizenship first acquired the support of the Churches, a difference of opinion arose on the question of our policy. The Nonconformists accepted our views for the strengthening of the national character in all essentials except their practical application.

A close study of the forces working behind the national spirit abroad had compelled Lawrence to accept the view that a citizen's first duty is to learn to bear arms for his country. This he adopted at the outset merely academically, because he was not blind to the risks to the League. So long, however, as this primary duty remained a vague doctrine our Nonconformist supporters made no objection. Under some circumstances Dr. Barker admitted military training might become a national obligation. He also made some bland references to the heroic soldierly spirit of Cromwell's Ironsides. When, however, Rivers insisted that if a citizen's first duty were to bear arms, it became the task of the State to teach him how to fight, this wing of the League refused to follow us. Mr. Rivers's view, Dr. Hendon Barker declared, led to the most blatant militarism. The application of this principle would lead England away from her noble historic path, and convert the first friend of civil and religious freedom into a

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partisan of the methods of Cæsarism and tyranny. The controversies at our committee meetings grew heated. The Bishop of Buckwater, who was in the chair, in order to prevent a split in our ranks, moved that the subject was still too unripe for us to consider whether it should become part of the League's teaching. This was carried. The victory, so far as it went, therefore, was with Dr. Barker. Lawrence, who hated compromise, was annoyed. 'When you let in the chapel,' he said, 'the chivalry of the shop-parlour comes in too.' This bitter saying was reported to Dr. Barker, who regarded the voice of the shop-parlour (of which he was the most popular spokesman) as the spiritual voice of the nation, and he was stirred to great wrath.

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CHAPTER XIII

How easily little trains of unintentional malice may be laid and exploded in the darker ways behind a man's public life! To my stepmother's family there was a Nonconformist branch, and in this serious circle she and Mrs. Hendon Barker had become acquainted. Calls were exchanged, and the ladies met occasionally at fancy fairs and in other spheres of charitable activity. These amiable relations were not affected by the controversy in the League of the Higher Citizenship, although naturally my stepmother took the side of the heir of Beckstone. She had no fear of militarism. Every man, she considered, ought to be trained as a soldier. What was so attractive as a military bearing? Plumes, red coats, moustaches, sabretasches, and all the panoply of war, appealed to the taste of a lady whose favourite spectacle was a Guards' parade. In the discussion which now arose on this subject I have no doubt that my father's wife gallantly bombarded Mrs. Barker with martial arguments. She respected the Church, but she loved the Army; in a great empire such as ours both were equally necessary. Had the controversy been kept to the attractions of a military career, no harm would have been done. Unluckily, dangerous fields were explored. They touched on morals, and the relations of Lawrence

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Rivers and Diana Leighton. My father is my authority for this.

'Here,' I imagine my stepmother declaring, 'begin the influences which I deplore. O Mrs. Barker! if we could only free Lawrence Rivers from this entanglement, he might become a great national leader!'

'It is our duty to try,' her friend replied.

It chanced at this time that a very able book entitled *Conscription or National Collapse* had been written by General Sir Charles Reid, K.C.B., a cousin of Diana's father. From this work Lawrence Rivers had quoted in order to confront the voluble but hasty arguments set forth at the League meetings by the reverend doctor. When the controversy finally found its way into the press, Lawrence again turned to this authority with crushing effect. The general, foreseeing such arguments as those recklessly brandished by Dr. Barker, had reduced them to absurdity in anticipation.

Inadvertently the Doctor had made use of the very phrases invented by the general for this purpose. A trap had caught him. No one submits to ridicule in the public press with equanimity—not even a popular Nonconformist divine. In some heat, therefore, the Doctor sought a telling retort. It was suggested by his opponent's private conduct.

Probably he took counsel with Mrs. Barker before launching it. 'Might we not assume,' he asked, 'that Mr. Rivers's dangerous teaching was due to an infected source? The author of *Conscription or Collapse* was uncle to Mrs. Leighton! In spite of our best intentions, we all of us take our colour from our environment.'

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Finding the hint too obscure, Dr. Barker went a step further.

'Until Mr. Rivers escapes from the toils a woman has woven around him,' he repeated to other leading members of the League, possibly in words suggested by my stepmother, 'he can have no claim to speak for us. At present his chief aim is to lead us in the ways chosen for us by our enemies.'

From the tide of malice which flowed through my ears, however, Lawrence was protected by his powers of swaying the opinions of all who came into personal contact with him, and for a while he ignored the nature of his opponent's attacks. Whilst the most generous minds ever allowed him the widest latitude, the meaner sort whispered that the time had come for him to choose between the lady and the League.

What was working behind the open discussions at our meetings, Diana Leighton was the first to discover—how, I have failed to ascertain. Whispers may have reached her through my stepmother, an adept in conveying what she called 'unpleasant truths' under the cover of artless statement. This energetic lady was the only person in touch with both antagonists in the quarrel. Lawrence's views reached her from me, whilst Mrs. Barker might well have represented those of her reverend spouse to an acquaintance so anxious to hear them. However, it little matters who flashed the signals which Diana Leighton read.

I was sent for and questioned. What did it all mean?

'Hasn't Lawrence told you?' I asked, with an assumption of cheerful ease.

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'He says that you have let in the spirit of the shop-parlour. But that isn't an explanation.'

'No?' I assented doubtfully.

'Besides,' Diana continued, 'I'm not sure that Lawrence knows.'

'Why not?' I asked.

'Because there are some things they daren't tell him.'

We were now on the fringe of the subject which by common consent she and I had tacitly agreed never to approach.

In proportion as I had been admitted into the friendship of the clever and generous woman—for whatever her enemies may have said of Diana, I never once knew her guilty of a mean thought—it had become impossible for me to wound her feelings. I helped to hide her, as it were, from herself. Perhaps I lacked the courage or hardness of heart to do my duty. At the outset, four years earlier, I had shown a bolder front. But since I had been brought under a double spell. Lawrence dominated me on one side, Diana on the other, till unconsciously I may have accepted the theory that certain chosen souls are sent into the world to be a law unto themselves. However the relations of these two may have 'shocked' the moralist of the shop-parlour, they did not shock me: rather, their joint brightness helped me to see a way to regions of thought which my own unaided imagination and weaker powers of flight could scarcely reach. I am not a poet, but my association with these two gifted beings gave me glimpses of a radiant world which faded from me whenever I missed their light. To be accepted as one worthy to breathe their diviner air, even

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now seems the most glorious compliment. My very affection for them, therefore, blunted the weapons with which otherwise I might have helped them. Had I attempted to persuade Diana Leighton that she was ruining Lawrence's career, I knew that I should be shattering the gracious kingdom of the mind which they had jointly built. Nevertheless, the sentiment that made me hesitate how to answer was not selfishness.

'Perhaps,' I said at last, 'our elements are a little unkindly mixed.'

'How?' she asked.

'We ought to have ascertained how far the Barker gang would go with us before taking them on, but the excitement of Exeter Hall was too much for us.'

I meant to raise the usual veil of dust. Her words blew it aside.

'If you are my friend,' she said, 'you will tell me whether it is anything to do with me.'

'What on earth have you to do with it,' I asked desperately, 'except that you are a relation of the general who helped Lawrence to "score off" Dr. Barker?'

I saw her doubts growing in her eyes.

'You mean,' she said, 'that Dr. Barker and his friends believe I'm the evil influence behind Lawrence?'

'It means that they want to capture the League and turn it into an engine for party politics.'

'Now I understand,' she said. 'You warned me years ago at Oxford.'

She was facing the facts! She had dragged me into the light where the worst shapes are seen. A

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panic seemed descending on her, sliding down from the still grey November skies without, filling the familiar room with gloom, and her face with the wistfulness of vanishing beauty.

'Brutes make the worst of everything,' I went on, compelled to speak by the appeal in her eyes. 'But it's too late now. The enemies are at the gate. You can only fight them.'

'What's the worst they say?' she asked. 'Don't spare me. My head has been too long in the sand. You encouraged me to keep it there.'

'You can guess the worst,' I said. 'You know what I think—what your friends think. That's enough. Lawrence would never have gone so far but for you. Look at our side of the picture.'

'No, no,' she answered. 'I've looked at it too long. I've had flattery enough—especially from myself. You were right at first. I'm spoiling Lawrence's career.'

I made no answer.

'Is that what they say?' she asked.

'Something like it,' I admitted.

She rose from her chair, went to the window and opened it. The familiar smell of London—autumn damp tainted with smoke—drifted in.

'After all,' I urged to comfort her, 'nothing's changed.'

'Except summer to winter,' she answered. 'Thank you for sparing me for so long.'

Then I left her. What occurred between them I can only guess, but on the following morning, just as I was about to start for the League offices in Victoria Street, Lawrence rushed into my room. What had I said to Diana?

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It was not easy to remember.

'I told her,' I said at last, 'that the Barker gang are bent on capturing the League, and she inferred that she was the weak spot in your armour.'

'And you let her think that, John!' he exclaimed.

'No, I tried to prevent it. But what has happened?'

'Diana left home last night for Rome. At last they have frightened her off the field. I've just seen Barker.'

Rivers's face was white with anger, and I guessed that the forces working behind the open councils of the League had become articulate at last.

'You know what they're saying then?' I said.

'I always knew. Now I'm going to Rome to bring her back.'

And he went. But I knew that he was obeying his sense of chivalry and not the claims of his love. And Diana Leighton knew it too, and he came back without her.

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CHAPTER XIV

WHO shall say where affection and admiration end and love begins? All I know is this. From Diana Leighton Lawrence Rivers gathered impressions which his intellect amplified and his enthusiasm fired.

There are in my possession copies of a few of Diana's letters throwing light on what seems obscure in their conduct. How obtained it is needless for a secretary to explain. One of these, written at Rome after her refusal to return with him to London, shows how the spirit of self-sacrifice, dormant for so long, had been awakened by what she had heard from me.

'Those who depart from the beaten track,' she wrote, 'too often tread on thorns. John Strood with his odd little withered smile gave me the first warning. You shall tread them no longer. Whilst I am in Rome and you in London, the worshippers of the little Grocer Gods can only blame us for what we have done, and not for what we are doing. Your present, at least, will be free from their blight. And remember this, Lawrence, I am not deaf to the claim of the dumb strong hours. Alas! every melancholy birthday brings its warning. Time, on the side of circumstance, is against me. What sad woman with grizzled hair can hope to fight this fell alliance? I held my ground till grey-haired reason

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bid me retreat! My triumph is in the past. To-day I can only hamper your future. You say I have helped you, brought out the best of you, quickened your youth, taught you that action is the noblest poetry of life. You even pretend, sweet flatterer! that your very patriotism sprang from the seeds I planted! Well, for the comfort of my own heart I 'll believe it. From Rome I 'll watch what you are doing in London. No, no! return was impossible. Now at least no one can say, "Let Lawrence choose between the lady and the League!" . . .'

On the next portion of my friend's career it is most painful for me to dwell, because it has become so closely associated with my own. But though my own dignity is here at stake, my determination to tell the truth at all risks will not allow me to seek personal security in the dark ways of misrepresentation. For the necessity compelling me to drag my own affairs into this record of my friend's life, it will be acknowledged that no apology is necessary. Unfortunately the one would lack coherence but for the light which the other throws upon it. I do not think that I am a vain man, as too many biographers have been. Had I been the victim of this weakness, I should never have retained (so long as I did) the confidence of Rivers, the friendship of Diana Leighton, or the respect (gained in spite of herself) of that woman of strong character, my stepmother. The revelation that I am about to make at the expense of the tenderest emotions in the human heart, would have overwhelmed with shame a student of character less courageous than myself. The confession is made because my debt to history is greater than respect for my own dignity. Heroism

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[illegible] in the most suspected places. The [illegible] smile which Dana Langton fancied does [illegible] always spring from a wakeful heart. What [illegible] from Street appear ridiculous if a clear [illegible] of the character of Lawrence Rivers is given [illegible] world.

[illegible] stepmother, to whom I have endeavoured [illegible] justice as a moving force in the [illegible] family, had eclipsed the influence of my [illegible]. An extremely intelligent man, he had used [illegible] slipperiness to spare himself trouble. The place [illegible] vacant his wife filled. In her nursery, at [illegible] top of the little house in Mayfair there were now [illegible] children, my half-brothers Charles and Henry. When [illegible] was born my taste for arithmetic [illegible] me to remark to my stepmother, then [illegible] the dignity of first motherhood with an austere complacency which seemed to say, 'After all, I'm worthy of higher things!' that by the time my 'baby brother' came of age, my own years would number [illegible]!

'When that arrives, John,' she answered, 'I shall hope to see you a grandfather.'

'A grandfather on my income!' I protested. 'Oh dear!'

'Please don't complain of your poverty, John,' she said; 'it's vulgar, and reminds me of extravagant stockbrokers in bad times.'

This comparison was scarcely happy, for as Lawrence's secretary I was receiving two hundred pounds a year, and another two hundred pounds as servant to the League. The first had become almost a sinecure, but the last entailed considerable labour. My financial situation naturally coloured my reply.

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'You know what my income is,' I said. 'So far I haven't been compelled to ask my father to supplement it.'

'I've not forgotten that, John, and shall take it into consideration.'

I had become so used to patronage that I didn't wince. For, after all, why should we? There are some natures born to scatter condescensions, others to pick them up with humility. Moreover, marriage with my father entitled Mrs. Strood to exercise over me the modified maternal authority which she quite naturally usurped. When, therefore, she generously recognised that I had abandoned all present claims on my father's purse, I also ventured to hope that her approval of my good conduct was not intended for its sole reward. This view further conversations on the same subject strengthened.

'If,' she said one day, when we were taking tea in her boudoir (a little room at the top of the house next to the nursery, whence I could overhear my half-brothers at their childish sports), 'if only Lawrence Rivers were as steady as you, John, he might do anything.'

'Perhaps,' said I, 'he would be, if he had as weak a digestion, and were compelled to drink hot water with his meals. Lawrence's vitality is always at full blast, but I'm compelled to economise mine. Has it ever occurred to you that conduct has much more to do with the strength or weakness of the stomach than the moralists admit?'

My stepmother flinched at the word 'stomach,' although she was acquainted with ladies not afraid to call a spade by its ugliest name, and before she had recovered from the faint shock, I had explained

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my meaning. 'Too much excitement makes me ill. It only drives Lawrence's energies at higher pressure. Besides,' I added, 'I take morals as I find them. For me they are ready made. Lawrence has a morality of his own.'

But my stepmother interrupted me, the discussion seeming in doubtful taste.

'I dislike this wild talk about morals, John,' she said firmly. 'All the improper philosophy in the world will not make me believe that we can change our morals as we can change our hats—to suit the weather.'

'To suit human requirements, rather,' I insisted, anxious to broaden her views. 'Even the institution of marriage may undergo changes in the future. Indeed, the more I study current social phenomena in America and England, the more I 'm persuaded that its permanency is threatened.'

'Nonsense, John, nonsense,' she replied; 'I don't believe what you say, and I know you don't expect me to believe it. Anything that weakens the marriage tie will ruin the race which encourages it. The might of the British empire is rooted on its sanctity. Listen to those darlings how happy they are.' (The babies were uttering vague sounds between tears and laughter whose meaning a mother alone could fathom.) 'I never listen to their lovely voices, John, without feeling this. Indeed I never go into the nursery without regretting the number of eligible young women and men who pretend to find happiness outside this natural domestic centre.'

'But how,' I asked, 'can a man hope to marry on a doubtful four hundred pounds a year which any turn of the wheel may take from him? I 'm full of

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domestic tastes. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to have a wife who would prevent me from eating things which didn't agree with me and lift me out of the dreariness of clubs and the melancholy of lodgings. I'm not a bachelor by design, but necessity. The women fling themselves at the head of such men as Lawrence—you should see some of the letters they write him!'

'Disgusting!' interrupted my stepmother.

'Possibly, but there they are all the same. I never had a love-letter in my life, and who on earth wants to marry a little secretary with no money and a weak digestion?'

My obvious policy with my stepmother was to make the worst of my case, and I did, for I wished her to see that when my father died I had every right to share with her babies.

'You do yourself the greatest injustice, John,' she replied, guessing my purpose, 'not, I'm afraid, from modesty, but from a sort of perverted vanity. Marriage is a very solemn state, but it is one which every virtuous man should aim at entering, and you are that, John, I assume, in spite of your wild talk! Now with this in view, John' (here my stepmother smiled), 'I should like you to regard me really as your own mother.'

'Ridiculous!' I exclaimed. 'I look at least ten years older than you do!'

'But I can't forget,' she replied with her most winning smile, 'that you are five years younger.'

(I was six.)

'Fortunately,' I returned, 'there are other things than years which count. You can never be old.'

My stepmother bridled and said, 'John, you

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mustn't flatter me; but perhaps I do pick it up from the dear children!'

She meant the spirit of eternal youth with which I had crowned her!

'But,' she resumed, 'as I said just now, your future is the subject of my most earnest thoughts. Need I say how much it would add to your father's happiness and my own if we could see you happily and prosperously married?'

This conversation at the time merely amused me. We had had so many like it.

But experiments with marriage are as dangerous as playing with matches. Who knows where the spark may fall? The human heart is full of dangerous combustibles. From this even mine, in spite of the 'withered smile,' is not, or should I not rather say, was not free?

When, a few weeks later, my stepmother said, 'I want to introduce you to Charis Darley, John,' I little suspected the troubled world which she was tempting me to enter.

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CHAPTER XV

THERE is something mysterious in names. Unknown, they convey no definite impression, but later, as we associate them with the human attributes they identify for us, they often cover whole kingdoms of thought or feeling. Take the names of the great dead at haphazard. The word 'Shelley' or 'Darwin,' catching the reader's eye in a newspaper, conveys at a flash visions of lyrical beauties exquisitely expressed, or vast regions of knowledge heroically explored. Names have their magic and stir within us elements of feeling never realised till we stir under the spell.

I can hardly believe that once the name of Charis Darley scarcely moved my curiosity to wonder who she was.

'Miss Darley,' my stepmother replied, 'lives with a widowed aunt in a charming old house on the Chelsea Embankment.'

I further learned that the aunt was a Miss Leigh, and her niece, daughter of Mrs. Leigh's late brother, Colonel Darley, who had died of enteric fever at Naples.

'But why I'm so anxious to introduce you to Miss Darley,' continued my stepmother, 'is because she so badly wants to know you. She admires your work.'

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'What, on the League?' I asked.

'Yes. She and her aunt are members. They've both taken it up. That's why Charis Darley wants to know you. The fact that I was your stepmother gave me a reflected glory in her eyes. She's quite a girl, twenty-one or thereabouts, and extraordinarily good-looking.'

'What's she like?' I asked.

'Tall, with a beautiful figure and the loveliest eyes and hair; she's exceptionally well educated and of independent means.'

'Few daughters of Eve are so well endowed,' said I playfully, 'but how is it that she hasn't married?'

'Not for want of chances,' said my stepmother, 'but she's the sort of girl who expects men to do things, you know.'

'And I've done things,' I reflected.

I was becoming more interested.

'As you know, the emancipated young woman who smokes cigarettes with her back against the mantelpiece,' resumed my stepmother, 'is a type I loathe. But Charis isn't a bit like that. But she's coming to lunch on Wednesday, so you'll see for yourself.'

I went to lunch, and I did see for myself.

But why waste words before making the plunge. The truth must be told. Why bang the old erotic cymbals? Dew and fire, roses and lilies, and all the frail comparisons feverishly clutched at by lovers in all ages, will avail me nothing to paint her. A man has feeling and a man has words, but in love the last can be no measure of the first. There are states of mind that seem to lie in wait for our souls and spring on them like a tiger on its prey. That day, in my

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stepmother's drawing-room, the passion seized me with its unutterable grip of delight and wonder. 'Have you,' my heart asked me, 'been reserved for this?'

'Do tell me about the League,' she said. 'Which side will win?'

'Our side,' said I.

Her hair was several shades too dark for ripe corn, her eyes—but this is not the place, nor am I the man, to write epitaphs on the graves of wasted raptures. On these walls the trophy of the biographer's heart must not be hung! The temple is built for other votive tablets. But out upon these metaphors to evade truth! This is no journal of the emotions of John Strood! It is enough to admit that he fell in love and, as it seems now, at first sight. O triple fool! What a fate for a philosopher and a man of letters—though the less philosopher and the meaner man of letters he if he tell not the truth! Henceforward I must become the mere machinery that records. Although my heart be crushed and torn under the wheels, my understanding shall stand outside and work the engine.

When Miss Darley left and my father was out of the room, my stepmother took me gently in hand. What, she asked, did I think of Miss Darley?

'She's very beautiful!' I replied.

My stepmother nodded approvingly, and informed me that the young lady had been greatly impressed by my conversation.

'What did she say?' I asked eagerly.

'She was much struck by your loyalty to Lawrence Rivers, and said such generosity had become very rare,' replied my stepmother. 'Mind you call soon.

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If you don't she'll be disappointed. I dislike to speak too openly on such matters, John, but one must take the world as it is, and there is a practical side to life which those who seek happiness and at the same time desire to do their duty as good citizens cannot afford to neglect. You, I could see, much admired Charis Darley. Charis Darley admired you. From such simple beginnings the highest happiness often springs. Pray do not misunderstand me or imagine that I 'm a vulgar matchmaker. You are an eligible bachelor of small means but, if I may say so, picturesque position. Charis is a young woman with a fortune of her own.'

'*Verbum sap!*' said I.

'What does that mean?' she asked hastily.

'That I'll take the hint,' I answered, 'and I'm grateful to you for it, mummy!'

When we were on easy terms I called her 'mummy,' and she rather liked it, although she preferred to be addressed as 'little mother' in public, accepting it as evidence of her sweet graciousness towards her stepson!

Soon after this my father came back and no more was said. In my dealings with him I had found it convenient to pass through the gates guarded by his wife. Thus we were spared any painful conflict and enabled to confine our conversation to the iniquities of the Government, the appalling weight of local taxation, or similar matters of no family moment. For my father knew that I thought he ought to make me an allowance, and I knew that he expected his wife to save him against all filial raids. He had an affable power of benevolently looking in the directions which my interests did not touch.

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On the evening of the day on which I had met Miss Darley, I saw Lawrence Rivers without mentioning her name. Our instincts operate in spite of ourselves, and under this silence some subterranean force must have been at work. For Miss Darley had spoken enthusiastically of Lawrence's powers and of 'his splendid attempt to stir the national conscience.' But the weakness which man calls love, even before we are conscious that we are under its power, subdues whole regions of the mind to the tyranny of self. Those who stray into this irrational kingdom are watched suspiciously as trespassers and interlopers, and the keeper's name is Jealousy. As I listened to Miss Darley's praise of Lawrence Rivers I was conscious of being little pleased. I wanted to talk of something else. Instead, therefore, of telling him of the beautiful and enthusiastic admirer who knew his poems by heart, I persuaded myself that her existence could be of no possible interest to him. He lived in an atmosphere of female adulation. The brilliant and generous-minded Diana Leighton had left London for his sake. Why should Miss Darley be allowed to add her tribute to this tide of flattery? I decided to prevent it if I could, for the girl's sake.

Two days later I had my first interview with her alone. The sweet poison filled my veins. I walked London with a vision before my eyes. The last days of October were upon us. The leaves were dropping from the trees; overhead, in dim skies, soft patches of blue looked down on the turmoil below; the troubled horizons of the streets were lost behind a delicate haze—the charming azure sister of the unborn November fogs. It was on one of these pensive days that I found my way to

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Chelsea. The gulls were already sweeping over the river; on the trees in Battersea Park on the other side the autumn tints were shining in subdued glory under the pale sunshine. The leaves of the plane-trees, fluttering down one by one to the pavement, lay in soft yellow patches, and made me think of the lover in Rossetti's poem, 'The Blessed Damozel' —perhaps because the poet's name vainly tried to give dignity to the mean efforts of the builder in red brick which I had passed on my way.

And there, looking across the pale flow of the river and the waning autumn, was the pleasant Queen Anne house where Charis Darley lived! The charm which drew me was interfused with the silvering world without.

My heart beat as I rang the bell!

Miss Leigh was out, but Miss Darley was at home. I followed the servant across a small square hall, with the firelight dancing on the white panelled walls, up an easy staircase to a beautiful room overlooking the dying beauties of the plane-trees and the soft river mists. On the white panelled walls were hung a few water-colour drawings; there was a rose-pink carpet on the floor; the furniture was Chippendale, and on a small slender-legged table in a bowl a mass of late roses was basking in colour.

As a rule a room leaves no impression on me; but on that the ancient spell had fallen. She had sat in those chairs, trodden that carpet, arranged those roses, mused before this same landscape with the gliding river and bronzed-edged boughs!

I looked about me with a sense of exquisite pleasure till suddenly my eyes fell on a large framed photograph of Lawrence Rivers. The handsome

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clean-shaved face gazed at me over the bowl of roses in the familiar masterful way. It was an excellent likeness, but, to the thoughtful, fearless eyes, the firm sensitive mouth, the thick dark hair, there seemed to cling an unconscious air of ownership! Had I set out in secret to discover a new world only to find that Rivers already ruled it?

What was he doing here?

On Diana Leighton's mantelpiece the same photograph stood, but here its presence seemed a threat diffusing across the pretty room a feeling of unequal rivalry.

I was still gazing at the portrait when Miss Darley entered the room.

'Sit by the window, Mr. Strood—we 're so proud of our view,' she said after we had shaken hands.

I took the armchair to which she pointed. Over her shoulder the portrait watched me.

Then for a few minutes we talked of trifles—the weather, London in autumn, the play she had seen the night before—the talk we wade through in a first attempt to cross the plains of acquaintance to reach the regions where friendships are formed. I felt that she was helping me over the ground, for I had little to say concerning the weather or the new play. It was the story of a woman still beautiful, who, looking back at her vanished youth, suddenly discovers that all the higher prizes of life have been missed. Then reflection steps in. Had she started with the experience which the years had brought, how easily from this bitter and wasted knowledge might the foundations of a happy life have been built.

'*Si jeunesse savait!*' I murmured sympathetically.

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When she rang for tea I found myself talking easily enough.

'Many women regretted their vanished youth,' I said, thinking of Diana Leighton, 'and men too. Looking back, the best of us are chiefly conscious of the "undone vast." Probably the hero of Browning's "Last Ride" found something to regret even in that thrilling performance.'

'To regret,' she answered, 'yes, but only because it could never, never be repeated.'

Then I looked at her beautiful face radiant with the vitality animating it, and longed to know what her soul was like. What spirit was shining within this lovely case? But a woman's personality—the thing that flashes or softens in her eyes, that communes with herself before the glass, and becomes a faint spark on the soft thresholds of sleep, has been created to evade the deepest researches of man. Has the clear soul of the young girl, as the poets have seen it, any existence outside their dreams? I think some such doubt even then must have risen in my mind, for I said, 'The regrets on which you will look back, then, will be those that come of accomplished ambitions?'

She smiled as she answered.

'I've only one ambition—to get the best that life can give me.'

'With that,' said I with clumsy sincerity, 'nature has done its best to endow you.'

She frowned a moment, gave me a swift glance, then smiled again and let my uncouth answer pass.

A voice murmured within me: 'Hear her! She asks the best. Think what you have to offer in her markets!' To still it I flung it a platitude: 'Of

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course, Miss Darley, it depends on what you call the best.'

'The best,' she repeated, 'the very very best. The world's highest happiness! That's my best!'

'And do you hope to get it?' I asked.

'I'm not sure—but I shall clutch as much as I can. A little must remain in my greedy fingers.'

'Does the happiness which moralists assure us grows from unselfishness, come within the range of your desires?'

'Something like it does, romanticised and sentimentalised—the sacrifice for something worthier than one's own claims. Mrs. Strood told me that you had sacrificed everything to help Lawrence Rivers.'

I felt the portrait watching me over her shoulder. It seemed to say, 'Tell the truth.'

'I've thrown in my lot with the man,' I answered, 'because I love him.'

Here the portrait prevailed.

'How splendid!'

The cry made my heart thrill.

'What sweet flattery!' said I. 'I wish I deserved it. It's true I might have become a worshipper of the Grocer God—you know Rivers's famous poem?—but when I was very young I fell under his influence. He beat the drum and blew the trumpet, and, whether I would or not, I followed in the van. Now, whatever victories he may win, or whatever battles he may lose, I shall share a humble tithe of glory or disappointment. Both my shares will be enjoyed in obscurity. Whilst Lawrence is feasting with the Captains I shall be eating biscuit stolen from the table in my bed in the attic!'

And as I spoke I felt, for the first time in my

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life, the enthralling delight of drawing on myself a beautiful woman's whole interest.'

'You make far too little of your coming reward, Mr. Strood—far. Mr. Rivers told your stepmother that he could never have built up the League without your help.'

'That's hardly fair,' I replied.

'Hardly fair to whom?'

'To Diana Leighton.'

Then, even as I spoke, I felt the portrait watching me.

'Mrs. Leighton?' she asked.

'Yes,' I repeated, 'Mrs. Leighton,' and saw a shadow pass over her face.

'Is she very clever,' she asked, 'and charming?

'Very clever,' I answered, 'very charming and very unhappy.'

'Why unhappy?' she asked.

'Because I'm afraid, like the lady in the play, that she's looking back on her vanishing youth. Before she left for Rome, I heard her say her life had been a series of defeats mistaken for victories!'

'Of course I've heard of her,' Miss Darley replied, 'but——'

Here she broke off.

'You mean,' said I, 'you know of her unhappy marriage?'

'Yes,' she said.

The little word stopped me dead. A haze of doubt seemed to obscure the brightness of her eyes. Our talk changed into a less sincere key. A clock struck five, but as I rose to go she said, 'Mr. Strood, would you do me a favour?'

'Certainly,' I said.

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'Please ask Mr. Rivers to sign this photograph. I know he must be worried to death by autograph-hunters, but perhaps that's why I dare to bother him.'

'He'll sign it with pleasure,' I answered, taking the photograph from its frame.

'It's a splendid likeness, isn't it?' she said—'so full of life!'

'Very full,' said I. 'The born leader telling us all what to do, and never doubting that we'll do it!'

'I admire that look in a man,' she said.

'Some tyrants have had it,' I returned critically. 'There is a head of one of the Cæsars in the British Museum with just the same look.'

'No, Mr. Strood, I don't agree with you. The bust you mean is all ice, Mr. Rivers is all genial fire.'

This was true.

Then she placed the portrait in a large envelope for me, thanked me again, and we separated.

I left the house with a mind full of disturbing elements. Another consciousness seemed enthroned within me. It had made me drag in the name of Diana Leighton. In the turmoil of self-examination I could not detect jealousy. Lawrence Rivers, moreover, for years had obeyed an allegiance which I believed his chivalry would compel him to continue to accept. No man ever repaid moral debts more scrupulously. But why had I pointed to Diana Leighton as a warning? Had I hinted for the same reason that the seeds of tyranny were concealed in Rivers? Was it possible that I wished to lower him in Miss Darley's eyes for her own protection? Were I capable of jealousy, jealousy would

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explain my motive, but I was not capable of it—especially with Lawrence!

When I met him at the League offices on the next day, I tested myself. Not a spark was there, only a delicate discretion.

'Do you mind signing this photograph?' I asked, producing the portrait Miss Darley had given me.

He glanced at it and said carelessly, 'Who wants it?'

'Only a friend of my stepmother,' I answered.

He sat down at my desk and wrote 'Lawrence Rivers' on the margin, then, pushing it aside, turned to me and said, 'John, I shall not be able to temporise much longer! Either I fling Barker into the sea, or he makes me walk the plank!'

'Is there no other alternative?' I asked.

'Yes,' said he, 'destruction, then reconstruction.'

'Of the League, you mean?'

He nodded, and I beheld on his face the dominant expression caught by the photographer. It chanced that we glanced down at the portrait together, on which the ink was drying.

'What a brute I look!' he said.

'It's very like you,' I replied.

'Then I'm sorry for it, John. Apparently I was in the "'Ercles vein."'

'But you never liked opposition,' I said.

'No, I'd rather be ruled by an intelligent autocracy than democratic dullness. Reason is one of the weakest forces in the national character. The English people must have some one to think for them. Their political earnestness is quite satisfied with press chatter and theological wrangling. We've

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a taste for controversy, but are becoming incapable of action.'

'Isn't that blank heresy, Lawrence?' I asked.

'Most truths are,' he replied. 'Perhaps in party government we've got all we deserve.'

'But don't we,' I asked, remembering Miss Darley's words, 'don't we clutch at the best?'

'Most of us in our political hearts think our Party system has provided us with that!'

'But even if our progress is slow,' I said, 'we're driven by our own steam.'

He looked at me thoughtfully a moment and said, 'That's one of the metaphors invented to hide us from ourselves, John. We're smothered under mountains of them.'

Soon after this he left the office, and having carefully packed the photograph, I returned it to Miss Darley by 'special messenger.'

No; the idea was absurd. How could I possibly be jealous of Lawrence Rivers because a beautiful girl wanted his autograph and knew his poems by heart? Rivers for her represented a focus of ideas rather than an individual.

So I trampled down the thought to the recesses of my mind.

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CHAPTER XVI

THE changes produced by death have tempted manufacturers of platitudes in all ages to repeat obvious facts concerning the mutability of human affairs. For this weakness there is some excuse in our youth, when a year seems a solid division of time rather than a swiftly-flowing measure of months and weeks driven by the Strong Hours. Till the first shock comes, a brief succession of fulfilled expectations comforts our unexplored kingdom with an illusory sense of permanency. Nature enables man to be happy only so long as it permits him to indulge his power of ignoring the terms on which lease of life has been granted. There could have been no human progress if man accepted the bargain in the spirit of some of the most sublime of his religious teachers. But his acts prove that death is the last thing he expects. Even when illness has swept us to the dark portals, the sanguine human soul still hopes to remain on this side. I had seen the Squire's health gradually going. Every year his burly frame grew more unwieldy in spite of his touching faith in the waters of Homburg and his trust in the superhuman powers of a stomach subjected to impossible tests. Distrust of my own digestion had driven me even then to drink hot water with my meals. 'It makes me sick to see

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you, Strood!' the Squire said to me the last time I saw him alive at Beckstone. 'You never give yourself a chance. Hang it, man! a fellow can digest everything eatable that he isn't afraid of! This infernal humbugging of the gastric juices is the silliest sign of a feeble age!'

So to prove the superiority of his own generation the Squire ate what he liked, drank port wine on the top of champagne, and expected the annual Homburg visit to drive out the insidious foe which self-indulgence tempted to find a lodgment in his blood. 'Don't talk to me about uric acid,' he said, when acquaintances uttered the usual warnings. 'The champagne I drink could hurt nobody—nor the port either, for the matter of that!'

But the bags under his eyes grew puffier, his girth increased, his breathing became an audible effort, until one sad November day, after blundering after the pheasants in his own coverts, a chill struck him. The old man's temperature went up, Lawrence was telegraphed for, but arrived at Beckstone half an hour after his father was dead.

At the funeral, at which of course I was present, Lawrence made a very philosophic chief mourner. Their estrangement had never permitted anything but a superficial reconciliation. The Squire in the last two years of his life had learned to brag about his son. Lawrence was 'a devilish clever fellow, as full of impractical ideas as a stable of flies, but a chap with an obstinate temper and an infernally shrewish tongue!'

Although the Squire professed indeed to be under no illusions on this subject, he could never conceal the fact that his son's fame increased his own pride.

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Lawrence was the first Rivers to get himself talked about!

In the conflict between them, if the elder Rivers had not won the victory, he had made the best of defeat. The two strong and alien temperaments had always clashed in life; death ended the friction. Before the displacement of things thus caused Lawrence was subdued, but he scarcely needed the comfort of the letters of condolence which the post brought him from all parts of the country. Even his enemy Dr. Barker offered him 'all the sympathy which the professor of a strong and simple faith can tender to the creedless.'

With these letters it was my task to deal. We acknowledged and returned thanks for the stream of condolence in the *Times*. One of the few letters to which Lawrence replied himself bore the Rome postmark and the handwriting of Diana Leighton.

I have often wondered what was in that letter. Some documentary evidence has enabled me to guess.

In a small notebook, in which at this time Rivers jotted memoranda so briefly as to be in many cases unintelligible, the following occurs: 'Nothing sadder than the repentance of an innocent soul. Poor Diana! There is always "philosophy's sweet milk!"'

May we not infer that a change had come over his mind? When a man offers a woman 'sweet reasonableness' for her comfort love has left the stronghold. Would he at that time have called Diana back from Rome? The growth of this philosophic mood in his letters had evidently encouraged the 'repentance' of which he spoke.

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But Lawrence's pencilled note ill prepared me for what was now to come.

There are sentiments in the human breast which wear themselves out all the more easily because they have taken root prematurely in the heart of youth.

After the Squire's death I wrote to Diana urging her to return to England. 'London,' I said, 'is the right place for you. All your friends are here, and all your influence. I miss your encouragement in a thousand ways, and so do others who need it more.'

In the long and friendly letter she sent me my appeal was answered by a single phrase. 'Old counsellors would be in the way of the new Squire who reigns at Beckstone.'

The change in Rivers's position gave him greater political weight. To the reputation won by his own efforts as a poet of original talent and a public man of dauntless courage, was added the prestige which wealth and position carry in a country which expects in its leaders something more than genius. Six weeks after his father's death Lawrence was re-elected President of the League; the opponents who had threatened to compel him to resign now shirked the conflict they had provoked. Dr. Hendon Barker was the last man to undervalue what he described as 'the solid attributes of rank and wealth' with which the general shifting of interests following the old Squire's death had endowed Lawrence.

I too profited by the change. The day after the funeral my generous friend and patron took me aside and, in the most flattering terms, begged me to continue to act as his Private Secretary at a salary increased to £400 a year.

'You 've done things for me, John,' he said, 'which

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no man has a right to expect from another. You 've saved me from bores, warned me against the worms who would sting me if they dared, and sometimes told me the truth when it wasn't flattering! Don't desert me when I need you most.'

Could I refuse such an offer? The business which his succession to Beckstone Park had brought made a secretary necessary to a man so impatient of details. Hitherto he had paid me £200 a year for doing little. Now he proposed to pay me £400 a year for services which otherwise he must have engaged a hireling to discharge.

'You might get a better man than myself at that price,' said I modestly.

He shook his head, smiled, and answered: 'Some things we can't purchase, John.'

This I knew was true.

When the Squire's will was read I discovered, to my unfeigned delight, that I had not been forgotten. The old man left me £1000 'as some acknowledgment of the time wasted in the service of his family.' This bequest, strange to say, pleased Lawrence almost as much as it gratified me.

It is possible, in my dealings with the two Riverses, that I had carried diplomacy to the threshold of dissimulation in allowing the Squire to believe me more entirely on his side than was actually the case.

'You played a very difficult game, John,' said Lawrence, 'and you thoroughly deserve it.'

'I don't, indeed I don't,' I replied, stung, perhaps, by a pang of conscience.

'You don't do yourself justice,' he replied with an odd smile; 'you stood by me without quarrelling with my father. Such efforts of repression on your

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part are certainly not too generously requited by a thousand pounds!'

Now I have enemies who have interpreted my friend's words to mean that the Squire was rewarding me for serving two antagonistic masters without embroiling myself with either. The malice which sees contempt where no reproach is implied I can afford to despise. To this form of abuse my friendship with Diana Leighton and Lawrence Rivers, as well as my intimate relations with the late Squire, have long exposed me. Those who only see cunning and greed in my conduct I can afford to pity.

My position was now greatly improved, and I was able to take in society and the respect of my acquaintances the place to which my services to a noble cause, and, if I may say it without vanity, my personal qualities entitled me. The genial wave of prosperity naturally tempted me to indulge the dream with which Charis Darley had filled my heart.

It seems absurd for a biographer devoted to philosophic methods to speak of his 'heart,' although the admission of the weaknesses implied by the existence of that fluttering organ is of itself proof of the fearless spirit animating this impartial record.

Whether I was wise or rash to confess to my stepmother, I am uncertain, but the sentiments which she had intended Miss Darley to provoke in me in any case could not have been for long concealed. Moreover, when a man is warmed by the soft fires then glowing in my breast, he is ready to reveal their peculiar beauty to any sympathetic inquirer.

There is nothing which compels our friends to admire us more than our growing prosperity, even if it is undeserved—which mine was not.

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'I always knew you would succeed!' said my stepmother, 'and always told your father so.'

This was not strictly true. When the Ways and Means Department had got rid of me, this kind lady had taken no hopeful view of my prospects. Indeed, she had not hesitated to hint that, if I expected her to allow her husband to support me, I was much mistaken. I had been given my chance and had missed it, and must now make the best of it. Well, the best had been made of it. The Squire's legacy had greatly increased my stepmother's respect for my intelligence. She had always urged me to make the most of the 'Rivers connection.' The thousand pounds on one side, the secretaryship on the other, showed how far I had followed her advice. Added to this, I had fallen in love in the direction she desired. I had thus reached her favour by three roads.

She boasted—the fact came to me indirectly—that she had always intended 'to make a man of me.' She at last believed that she was in a fair way to succeed. Nothing was now too good for me. The dubious asset had now become a credit to his family. My name appeared in the papers, my photograph was reproduced in a popular illustrated journal as 'a Man of the Day.' I was described as 'a leading mind behind the League.' You will find me in all the books of reference.

'You're getting quite famous, John, dear!' said my stepmother.

Tempted by her encouragement and approval, I told the truth in terms which now seem tainted by the spirit of melodrama.

'O mummie!' I exclaimed (for in these moments of tender confidence she permitted me thus to address

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her), 'O mummie! if Charis Darley refuses to marry me, I shall die of a broken heart!'

'If,' replied my stepmother, 'she does, I'll know the reason why.'

'Oh, fatuous fool that I was! Her air of resolution most absurdly strengthened my own hope. I spoke out of the weakness of my heart.

'There's only one danger,' said I.

'What's that?' asked my stepmother sharply.

'I think she's interested in me because of my reflected glory.'

'Mr. Rivers, you mean?'

'She's longing to meet him,' I replied.

'Then mind you propose to her before she does!' said my stepmother.

The kind lady I admit did her utmost for me. Miss Darley was frequently at my father's house in Arthur Place. I was her most constant squire, spending my money recklessly on theatres, suppers, restaurant lunches, flowers, and the other luxuries which strew the slippery path climbed by the love-sick bachelor.

Nothing could have been friendlier than Miss Darley's manner. There was something in it, too, that tempted me to hope. To accuse her of being a coquette would be unjust. In the affairs of the heart a woman may have a policy of her own. But who knows what purpose may dwell behind the conduct of a young woman taught by experience to believe in the power of her own beauty? I sometimes fear that my stepmother sang my praises too constantly, and that I may not always have reached the gallant standard to which, in her many private conversations with Miss Darley, I was generously raised.

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CHAPTER XVII

NEITHER my stepmother nor myself attempted to bring about a meeting between Lawrence and Miss Darley, although 'Mr. Rivers' was the subject of her constant conversation. For this the League afforded her an excellent excuse. After the Squire's death her interest in 'the poet of action,' as admirers now called him, increased. It seemed, she said, scarcely fair that one man should have everything.

'Except,' said I, 'happiness!'

I intended her to understand that a man may appear fortunate in the ways most envied by the world and yet bear the seeds of disappointment in his breast. She answered with some slight asperity, stepping forth from the ambush of reticence behind which such references are politely concealed.

'Surely, Mr. Strood,' she said, 'you don't expect me to believe that Mr. Rivers isn't happy because Mrs. Leighton has a husband living?'

'Why not?' I asked—and I cannot admit that pique tempted me to this indiscretion—'Why not? No man's heart is shielded with triple brass. Lawrence Rivers misses Diana Leighton every hour of the day.'

'What would Mr. Rivers think if he heard you say that?'

This rebuke silenced me for a moment. But if we

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had touched on one of those subjects usually avoided between a virtuous bachelor and a maid, I was not to blame.

'Of course, Miss Darley,' I said, 'it would be more discreet on my part to conceal my opinion, but my nature's too frank to permit me to hide the weakness of my friend even from his warmest admirers.'

'I have not the pleasure of knowing Mr. Rivers,' she said, 'and of course no right to protect him against your criticisms!'

The ring of spite and disparagement in this little speech pained me, and I was tempted, unwisely no doubt, to retort.

'You only know the man by his poems, Miss Darley. I know him by his acts.'

'Yes, I understand that no one respects him more than you do, Mr. Strood!'

'No one,' I replied, ignoring the inflection of irony in her voice, 'but I can't forget that he's human!'

But who can fathom the heart of a woman? The admission that her idol was not free from blemishes irritated her, and for the rest of that afternoon Miss Darley discouraged my efforts to amuse her.

It was chiefly out of consideration for me that Lawrence sometimes called at Arthur Place, although he liked my father, and may have been attracted by a perverted form of curiosity by my stepmother, whom, in earlier days, he had often heard me abuse.

'Your father's wife, John,' he once said to me, 'is very shrewd. A shrewd wife is a treasure to a lazy husband. Remember that when you choose a wife out of the tents of the prosperous!'

I recall these words because at the time my feet seemed bearing me in that direction.

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It was of course natural that Miss Darley should desire to make the acquaintance of Rivers; it was equally natural for my stepmother and myself not to desire their meeting. *Quieta non movere* is an excellent motto.

'Nothing good could come of it, John,' said my stepmother.

'Nothing,' I assented.

But the spirit of mischief which sometimes guides circumstances too often brings about that which we wish to avert.

One afternoon, at the end of March, Charis Darley, my stepmother, and I were sitting in the drawing-room at my father's house. Miss Darley had introduced my stepmother to her dressmaker Dorinne of Dover Street; I had met the ladies in Bond Street and we had returned together to Arthur Place.

The conversation, I remember, had taken a millinery bias. My stepmother hoped that Dorinne would make the best of her figure. 'Any one can fit you, Charis,' she said, 'but a matron of my proportions needs careful treatment.'

'Then you couldn't go to a better woman than Dorinne, Mrs. Strood,' Miss Darley replied.

If my stepmother expected a compliment I supplied it.

'Of course, mummie,' said I (at this time we were on terms of great affection), 'of course every one knows you 've one of the most beautiful figures in London.'

Miss Darley looked at me curiously.

'Isn't he delightful!' she said, turning to my stepmother.

'John's always nice!' returned my stepmother,

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with a little movement of the shoulders suggesting through a white lace shirt the fine lines of her bust.

'To go to a new dressmaker,' I observed, 'must always be an interesting experiment for a woman.'

'Because we never know how things may turn out, John?' my stepmother inquired.

'Because "hope springs eternal in the human breast,"' quoted Miss Darley. And as she spoke I heard the door-bell ring.

'I 'm not sure "hope" is the right word for it,' she continued, 'but I 'm quite certain one of the delights of life is the feeling that any moment may bring a new interest.'

'In youth,' I replied, 'every comet which swims into our ken has a jewelled tail.'

Here the door opened; the servant announced 'Mr. Rivers,' and I saw Miss Darley's face flush with pleasure.

From the darker chambers of my heart there came a sinister warning.

Rivers was introduced and took a chair between Miss Darley and my stepmother. I sat with my back to the light watching them.

Miss Darley's soft cheeks were now flushed with excitement. Was it the new comet? Doubts stirred within me. Was I to be for ever a spectator, never an actor in the game—one whose office it was to throw coals on other people's fires?

Miss Darley was thanking Rivers for signing her photograph.

'I don't remember signing a photograph for you,' he said.

'You sign so many,' she answered. 'It was the one Mr. Strood gave you.'

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'Strood never said it was for you.'

'What was the good of it? You had not met Miss Darley,' I interposed in my most practical manner.

But he paid no attention to me.

'The one you have,' he said, watching her face with interest, 'makes me look as though I had been caught trying to steal the crown jewels and was proud of the attempt!'

'It isn't too late to send me the other one, now, Mr. Rivers,' she returned with decision.

My stepmother's lips tightened. Miss Darley's request seemed wanting in maidenly reserve.

'You never get anything you want if you 're afraid to ask for it, Mr. Rivers,' she added, by way of excuse I suppose.

I confess that I felt pained. There should be bounds in Hero-worship—especially when the Hero is present. I glanced at Rivers. It was clear he did not share my feeling. He smiled back at her eagerly and asked where he should send it.

She told him the address. He repeated it slowly.

'I 'll remind you,' said I.

'I shall not forget,' said he.

How some natures change under certain influences! Charis Darley, who had seemed hitherto merely a charming English girl, suddenly became a brilliant young woman of the world bent—why not speak the truth?—yes, bent on flattering Lawrence Rivers to his face!

We talked poetry, we talked League politics—or rather they did—for my stepmother and I were quite inadequately represented in the discussion—

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till Miss Darley rose to go, and, before I could intervene, Rivers had proposed to see her into a cab.

'It's too kind!' she murmured flushing—with gratified vanity, I suppose.

Before my stepmother and I could recover they had left together.

'There!' she cried angrily, 'what on earth do you mean, John, by sitting like a stick and letting Mr. Rivers and Miss Darley have all the talk to themselves?'

'No one ever has a chance with him,' I replied gloomily.

'And I must say I 'm surprised at Charis,' resumed my stepmother; 'this open adoration of prominent men is really quite vulgar. Mr. Rivers may be charming, and no doubt is extraordinarily clever; still she ought to know better!'

'How should she?' I asked dejectedly. 'They 're all the same with Rivers.'

'All the same!' returned my stepmother indignantly. 'I've no patience with such nonsense. Besides, I was careful to make Charis Darley know the sort of man he is.'

I looked at her blankly.

'You mean,' I said at last, 'Mrs. Leighton?'

'Of course I do. But Charis behaved to him much more like an irresponsible married woman than a girl! I must say, John, I 'm disappointed in her.'

Disappointed? Imagine what wormwood to me!

For once I made no attempt to defend Lawrence, although my sense of justice made me feel that he was not to blame. A very beautiful young woman, in the language of the vulgar, had 'made a dead set' at him, and at the worst he had not gone more

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than half-way to meet her. Whether he ought to have chilled her warmth by his ice is a point which I am not qualified to decide. If Miss Darley stirred in Lawrence the same instincts that she moved in me, such powers of refrigeration were impossible. When we are young and the Syren sings, do we not all plunge into the flood? No, the mistake—if mistake there were—was one of policy. I should, at the outset, have concealed nothing from Lawrence. Had I gone to him and said, 'Lawrence! I love Charis Darley and have set my heart on marrying her!' he would have helped me, but because I mistrusted the lady (thanks chiefly to my stepmother) I exposed her to the very dangers I desired to avoid.

These thoughts and evil anticipations were filling my mind whilst I sat in silence listening to my stepmother explaining how dangerous it was for a girl of Miss Darley's nature to be brought under the fascinations of Lawrence Rivers.

'There's something magnetic about the man!' she said, 'I've felt it myself.'

'If there is,' I replied, 'I don't believe he knows it.'

'Knows it?' she retorted; 'of course he does. Why, I've felt him switching it on! All men are Sultans at heart! The sort of free-love atmosphere in which Mr. Rivers lives is quite unfit for a decent young woman to breathe. What's to be done to save her, John?'

'I don't know, I'm sure,' I replied feebly.

'Don't be so apathetic!' she cried with warmth. 'I can't bear it. There's only one thing you can do.'

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'What's that?'

'Propose to Miss Darley at once!'

'What!'

'Propose,' she repeated, 'before she has time to fall in love with him!'

'But she hasn't had time to fall in love with me yet!' I protested, heedless, in the dismay of the moment, of my own dignity.

'Tell her what you feel for her, tell her you love her, John—in fact, be the man you are!'

In the excitement of the moment my stepmother seemed to tower above me.

'When?' I asked.

'This evening. The aunt, Miss Leigh, is going to a Christian Science meeting. Dine at your club —I can't ask you here, we've friends coming and our table's small—and then run over to Chelsea!'

'And learn the worst?' I exclaimed.

'There need be no worst! Charis Darley admires energy and pluck in a man more than anything. She has the highest respect for you!'

'Has she, mummie?' I said; 'only please don't let me make a mistake.'

'Fiddlesticks, John! Marriage is a practical business. Charis understands that. She knows as well as I do that Lawrence Rivers would never think of marrying her. It's dreadfully shocking, and painful, and all that sort of thing, but as a married woman and a woman of the world, I fully made the girl understand that Mrs. Leighton stands in the way. I did it in your interest and the girl's. Charis has no one to look after her—for that fumbling aunt doesn't count—and it's our duty—yours and mine —to see Lawrence Rivers doesn't make a fool of

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her; for, John, I'm afraid he's quite unscrupulous about women—like Lord Byron and other men of genius for the matter of that!'

This reasoning carried no conviction with it even at that troubled moment when I felt in need of all the encouragement she could give, but, unfortunately, pique is often a sharper spur to action than wisdom is, and the contempt for my apparent pusillanimity which her manner did not conceal roused me to a pitch of recklessness such as I have rarely attained.

'I'll do it,' I said exultantly, 'I'll do it.'

'That's right,' said my stepmother.

'And you might,' I went on, 'give me a note for Charis Darley—something about that concert at the Queen's Hall next week will do. Under cover of that I could look in after dinner with greater propriety if any one happened to be there.'

'You are a good deal too cautious for a young man,' she replied, 'but I'll write something if you like.'

She sat down grimly and wrote a brief paragraph on thick-ribbed paper adorned with the Strood crest and the legend *Virtute non vi*, which may be interpreted, 'By manly virtue, not by brute force.'

'There,' she said, handing me the envelope, 'take your excuse.'

'To-night I'll know my fate,' I said. 'Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, John,' she answered; 'keep a cool head and a ready tongue. Remember every woman needs a strong and able man to look after her.'

So I squared my shoulders, threw back my head and strode from the room. It may be that in all natures lurks the spirit from whence the modern

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theatre has sprung, but looking back on myself with a mental eye enlightened by sorrow, although I can see much in my conduct to be pitied, I am conscious of nothing for which I need blush.

At the end of Arthur Place I caught a passing hansom, drove to my rooms, dressed carefully (dinner jacket, black tie, and neatest newest patent-leather boots), and then went to my club for a cutlet. But my appetite failed, and I knew that to force myself to eat at such a time would be to court a severe attack of indigestion. It was, however, one of those thrilling moments when a man is entitled to soothe his nerves with a bottle of old champagne. Some of the cheerful spirit which laughs in the froth of this most seductive wine must have found its way to my excited brain, for my terrors vanished for the moment. If marriage be the ultimate goal of every reasonable woman, why should I not succeed in persuading this charming girl to share its promises with me?

In the spirit of hope—of hope that thinned somewhat as I approached my destination—I drove to Chelsea. The March night was cold, the north-east wind whistled under the bright stars.

When I had first called on Miss Darley the leaves were falling from the plane-trees. Now the boughs were bare and black. Familiar things seemed to have acquired a share of my consciousness—as though they were part of the drama generating within my heart.

When my hansom stopped, the feeling of gallant complacency vanished. I was not a rich man (and I knew the value of wealth); although presentable, I was not a handsome man (but I knew the price

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set on physical attractions even in the male). What then had I to offer? Intelligence, sobriety of judgment, domestic tastes, and a loving heart.

Would these be enough? Could they satisfy the romantic claims of a much-flattered girl who knew Lawrence Rivers's poems by heart?

How quickly a mood changes! I rang the bell timidly. The brave bubbles which had risen with the wine into my head burst and their comfort was scattered! After all, alcohol even at twelve-and-sixpence a bottle [club-price] is only a drug.

A maid opened the door.

'Will you please ask Miss Darley if she will be good enough to see me?' I said. 'I have a note from Mrs. Strood which wants an answer.'

The maid took me up to a pretty drawing-room, where, in the flickering fire-light reflected by the slender Chippendale furniture, I seemed to see the chairs capering across the rose-pink carpet in an airy Bacchic dance. If I had been greeted by a peal of elfin laughter I should scarcely have been astonished. 'Ah ha!' the twisted Chinese dragon on the bronze vase seemed to say, 'here comes a queer suitor for our mistress!'

But the electric light destroyed the picture of delicate revelry created by the fire-glow and my quavering mood. The spell was removed from the room. The spirit of mockery came from within not without.

Yes, alcohol is a drug, however costly!

The door opened. Charis Darley entered the room.

She was wearing a pale pink dress and seemed surprised to see me.

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'I 've brought a note from Mrs. Strood,' I said quite firmly.

The beautiful figure in pink seemed to recede, the distance between us to grow. Would it be possible for me to fly across and nestle my head on that divine breast?

Head and heart were crowded with unutterable longings. For the pangs I felt, the lovely pink-clad figure across a thousand miles of rose-pink carpet broken by leagues of white rug, carried the only remedy.

Would she apply it?

'Won't you come nearer the fire?' she said, as she took the note.

'Thank you,' I said, moving irresolutely a few feet nearer the white bearskin rug. 'What does she say?'

Miss Darley, in a voice as untouched by emotion as though the accursed note had been an advertisement, read as follows:—

'My dear Charis,—John insisted on me writing because he wanted an excuse for coming. I 'm not sure what he wants to say to you, perhaps you can guess. Remember, Charis, there are depths in John no woman has ever yet plumbed!'

Had I been standing on my head on the rose-pink carpet, I could not have been more profoundly conscious of the absurdity of my attitude. All the props and stays of my personal dignity fell with a crash. My mouth opened, but no words came.

I don't quite understand,' said Miss Darley.

'Of course you don't,' I cried, clutching at the straws on the stream of shame. 'Mrs. Strood's letter is quite mad. She told me it was about some

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concert—next week—at the Queen's Hall—Brague —the violinist has a recital, or whatever it 's called. She wanted you to go with her. I 'll take the tickets.'

'The concert you refer to took place last week, Mr. Strood,' she replied.

'Then she meant another one next week like it, and I must have mixed them up, Miss Darley. I 've no memory for that sort of thing. I 've got such a lot to think about. In any case it doesn't matter, does it?'

I was voluble as one who seeks a broom of words to brush his folly to the dark places where no man sees it.

'Not a bit,' replied Miss Darley.

'That 's my stepmother's message,' said I wildly. 'What shall I tell her?'

'Say, all right,' replied Miss Darley. 'We can arrange after it 's been advertised.'

'After what 's been advertised?'

'The concert, of course.'

'How idiotic of me! The concert, of course! They are usually in the front page in the *Times*.'

Then came a silence during which I wondered whether I had floundered anywhere.

She was dealing gently with me! But a moment's reflection stung me. Why was she as anxious as myself to pretend there was no meaning in my stepmother's infernal letter? Suddenly my fears vanished. I rose to my feet.

'Miss Darley!' I exclaimed. 'Charis!'

'I quite understand,' she replied. 'Brague plays divinely, and I long to hear him again.'

'But it 's nothing to do with Brague,' I cried.

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'My heart is the instrument, your beauty the artist that draws out all its poetry, affection, manhood and—hope, Charis, let me at least have hope!'

'Mr. Strood,' she answered, 'don't say any more. I can't afford to lose you as a friend.'

This was true, although I didn't see it at the time.

'A friend, Miss Darley, a friend? I want to take the place of all your friends, to be everything to you, the most adoring lover and the tenderest husband that human affection ever made of a man.'

I dashed across the space of rose-pink carpet—I think to fold her loveliness in my arms and press her soft cheek against my own—but she rose from her chair (she was taller than I), and I stopped short of my goal.

'I couldn't think of marrying you, Mr. Strood, so please say no more about it,' she said resolutely.

'Why not?' I asked.

'There's only one reason. It's impossible for me to look on you in the light a woman is supposed to see her husband in.'

Here I fear I uttered a foolish gasp of grief.

'But,' she resumed, 'it's no reason because I can't be your wife that I shouldn't be your friend. Perhaps I may never marry.'

'You!' I exclaimed.

'Well, there's no necessity why a young woman with a competency and a taste for freedom should.'

'But the necessity will arise!' I exclaimed. 'Beauty such as yours was not sent into the world to be wasted.' Some vague memory of Shakespeare's sonnets was in my head. 'Think,' I resumed, 'think carefully, Charis, before you say no. Take time. You know so little of me. There's no man

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living who would try harder to make you happy. Give me a chance.'

'No, no!' she returned vehemently. 'I could never think of marrying you. I'm unalterable. There are no two people in the world less fitted to live together than you and I. We can't help what we feel. Perhaps we're not responsible for it. I thank you, Mr. Strood, for the honour you have done me, but must beg you as a friend never to mention this subject again.'

I felt her will overbearing mine, as well as the sense of chivalry stirring within me. 'Your wish,' said I, 'shall be my law.'

But even as I spoke some thoughts of winning her by long service fluttered in my brain behind the trouble and mortification. 'You can,' I added, 'always count on my devotion.'

Although defeated, I desired to withdraw with as much dignity as was left me. There are traditions which must be maintained.

'I never doubted that, so I will ask you the first favour now,' Miss Darley replied. 'Let this be a secret between us. Never tell any one.'

'Never let any one know that you refused me?'

'Yes.'

I reflected a moment. Glimmerings of my shattered common-sense were returning. Why should I tell anybody!

'Men, I know,' she went on, 'who've not quite had it their own way in—well—in foolish affairs of this sort, sometimes console themselves by confiding in their friends. Don't, Mr. Strood!'

'But my stepmother knew what I was coming over to say to-night.'

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'Tell her you repented in time!'

Miss Darley laughed.

'But I didn't repent!' I exclaimed. 'I shall love——'

'Hush! hush! That's all finished. Tell Mrs. Strood that I read her letter to you, and that when you saw it was unintelligible to either of us—as it was—that you thought better of it, and came away —what shall I say?—in safety?'

Here she laughed again. There may have been a comic side to the business invisible to me.

'But that wouldn't be true,' said I.

'It's as true as most of our self-protective diplomacy,' she replied.

'Protective against what?' I asked foolishly.

'You know as well as I do, Mr. Strood.'

Here I heard a carriage drive up to the door.

'My aunt!' exclaimed Miss Darley; 'she mustn't know. You'll do what I ask?'

'Yes.'

'And tell no one?'

'Yes.'

'And try to deceive Mrs. Strood—who deserves it for that letter?'

'Yes,' I repeated.

Here Miss Leigh entered the room. She was a pale, delicate lady of fifty, a lover of sentiment who touched the practical side of life (in words, at least) as lightly as possible.

'Ah, Mr. Strood!' said Miss Leigh, giving me a long thin hand.

'Mr. Strood has been good enough to bring me a letter from Arthur Place about the concert,' said Miss Darley.

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'Brague again?' inquired Miss Leigh. 'The divine Brague?'

Then Brague's art was discussed, with enthusiasm on the part of the elder lady, and in due course (as though nothing unusual had happened, and as though the serene skies of my heaven had not fallen in ruins about me) I shook each lady by the hand, and a moment later was on the Chelsea Embankment with the dark river flowing silently under the bridges and the night wind rustling dusty fragments of the newsvendor's trade against the stone parapets.

Above me in the pretty Queen Anne house I had just left, the lights shone serenely behind curtained windows.

But I was out in the cold with my sorrow.

But this is not a treatise on a broken heart, so let not my own grief destroy my sense of literary proportion.

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CHAPTER XVIII

ON the next morning, before I was up, I received the following note from Arthur Place. 'Am I to congratulate you, dear John? Come to lunch at my club. We can be alone there, and I long to know what happened.'

What had happened! I was unwell, my head ached, but was not certain of much else. I am not sure that I felt very much in love, for love—an emotion fed by instinct—ebbs and flows by attraction till human gratitude by its touch makes it nobler and more durable. Moreover, a disordered stomach discourages the sentiments under which romance hides truth. A man needs a strong constitution to be honestly sentimental.

I lay back in bed staring up at the cracks in the white-washed ceiling. In spite of the weight on my heart I yet hoped that the bath-water would be hot! Because the arrow of humiliation had winged me the comforts of life seemed none the less important.

Luckily the water *was* hot. I enjoy powers of reflection in my bath elsewhere denied. Through the comforting steam facts are plainly revealed. When she urged me to propose to Miss Darley—before the way had been properly prepared by patient and chivalrous courtship—my stepmother

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had made me the victim of an unforgivable experiment!

The woman whose advice had proved so dangerous ill-deserved my confidence. Henceforth I would be my own counsellor!

But as my blood began to circulate and the pores of my skin to act, a sense of honest indignation arose within my returning energy.

I would let my stepmother know what I thought of her!

But the memory of my promise to Miss Darley altered the shape of this last thought. Mrs. Strood, she had said, must be taught a lesson for writing that ridiculous letter. So she must! but how could this best be done? Miss Darley had suggested the way.

As I rubbed myself down with a rough towel my mind grew clear. I was, however, too unwell either for my duties at the League office or to meet Rivers, so I dispatched messages of excuse to both.

At half-past one I made my way through the east wind to the Minerva Club. Mrs. Strood is on the committee. The Minerva at that time was one of the centres of attraction to ladies of practical ideas. Originally formed with the object of teaching young women the advantages of domestic service, this amiable institution soon developed into a club with cook, butler, a staff of servants, a house dinner (at a moderate price), and an agreeable smoking-room. Here my stepmother had often regaled me with tea, but had never given me lunch.

The Minerva is a few minutes' walk from Piccadilly. As I turned off from that famous

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thoroughfare to meet my stepmother there was food for solemn thought. Should I let her see the fragments of a broken heart? Never. Rather should she behold the kindly philosopher saved by his own discretion.

How far a man may be justified in misrepresenting facts in order to annoy a meddlesome relative is not for me to decide. My stepmother, who met me in the hall, gave me a meaning look, but I shook my head. Nothing, I said, had happened. I had not asked Miss Darley to marry me because I discovered in time that we had too little in common!

'Then why on earth did you worry me about it?' she asked angrily. 'Did she get my letter?'

Here (and I am willing to accept all the blame) I strayed from the simple path of truth.

'Yes,' said I. 'She asked me what it was about—I suppose it was indistinctly written. I told her that I believed you wanted her to go to a concert and that I was to take back her answer. Then Miss Darley said "all right" and she'd like to come.'

'Good heavens!' exclaimed the astounded lady, 'there wasn't a word about a concert. I told her that you were coming over to propose to her and hoped that she would give you a favourable answer!'

'I see,' said I; 'you introduced my heart to Miss Darley for favourable consideration! I see now, quite clearly.'

'What do you see?' she asked.

'Everything,' said I. 'On my way over to Chelsea my mind changed; so your clever and considerate letter gave the young lady a chance of

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saving a situation which otherwise might have been made ridiculous.'

'What do you mean by chopping logic in this ridiculous way, John?' she exclaimed in angry bewilderment. 'Yesterday afternoon you fancied yourself in love with the girl. Two hours later, when you had to face her, you had frightened yourself out of it. You 've made me look a perfect fool!'

'No, no,' I protested gently; 'I only saved myself from looking one. Think a moment, please. You let Miss Darley see my cards. She insisted on looking the other way whilst I decided not to play them. Thus we were each spared the necessity of inflicting pain on the other, thanks to you!'

'What a disgusting muddle you 've made of this business!' my stepmother replied angrily. 'Do you mean to tell me that Charis Darley gave you a hint that if you proposed to her she would reject you?'

'It didn't quite come to that,' I answered.

'It comes to this then,' cried my stepmother; 'your foolishness made the girl sick!'

'On the contrary,' I replied, 'I 've reasons for thinking Miss Darley respects me more than ever!'

'Then she has behaved abominably—made a convenience of you to get at Mr. Rivers!'

Although I had relieved my spite by morally pummelling my stepmother I was ill-prepared for this blow back.

'The girl 's a coquette,' she continued. 'There 's no other name for her. Seeing your weakness she used you to attract Mr. Rivers. There are other ways of making a man look at you besides coughing at him when he passes your window!'

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Anger was making my stepmother vulgar.

'You are unfair to Miss Darley,' I replied, as severely as I could. But she brushed my rebuke contemptuously aside.

'I am not aware that Miss Darley ever tried to attract Lawrence Rivers,' said I, with cold severity.

'Then why did she send you to him for that photograph to be signed?' she asked.

'Plenty of them do,' said I.

'Not in that unblushing way,' said she.

'I really can't see anything unusual in that,' I insisted.

'You wouldn't,' she retorted, 'but I know better. It was why I warned her and made him out worse than he really is.'

'After your warning,' I replied, stung by a feeling of smothered animosity for which I have no name, 'after your warning, of course she would never think of trying to make him marry her!'

My stepmother emitted an irritable sniff.

'The worse I made him seem,' she said (and she enjoyed saying it), 'the more interested she grew. But you've missed your chance; the girl was in love with the man before she knew him! I've wasted my pains.'

But even this unseemly attack did not make me lose my patience.

'We won't quarrel about that,' I replied quietly. 'An impartial witness might think you overdid your part whilst I underplayed mine.'

'It's lucky for you,' said my stepmother rudely, 'there were no witnesses. If there had been they would have seen it was all your fault!'

This exhibition of female justice silenced me. To

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mark my disapproval of it I wondered whether it wasn't lunch time.

'Of course it is,' snapped my stepmother, 'if you've any appetite for it!'

Then I followed her to the dining-room.

The meal (they gave me a tough leg of a cold fowl!) was not a cheerful one, and when it was over I returned to my rooms where I passed the rest of the day over the fire in sad reflections.

Who knows to what disappointed love may drive a man? Me it had driven to lie to my stepmother in order to keep my promise to a selfish girl! The ablest of us have our weak moments!

But enough of my own sorrows; deep and bitter though they were at this period of my life, the memory of them shall be sacrificed to my duties as a biographer.

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CHAPTER XIX

IN spite of my resolution to keep myself and my feelings out of this biography it may be of some interest to record a change in—if I may use the phrase—my attitude towards life. A modified and, I trust, not unreasonable pessimism took the place of my youthful optimism. For a desponding view of things there are two causes. Either a man has all he wants and has found enjoyment vanish with acquisition, or else, by suffering the disappointment of defeat, has learned the hollowness of victory. I am, however, convinced that even if Miss Darley had married me, I should have arrived at exactly the same conclusions regarding life, although from opposite causes. I do not, of course, believe riches are always dust or love bitterness; but that all success bears with it the seeds of possible disappointment (especially in love) is an opinion which a wide acquaintance with the affairs of my fellow-men has taught me to hold even against my will. Wisdom bids us diminish the volume of expectation. If to accept this teaching is to be a pessimist I am proud to be one. It was not the view, however, that Lawrence Rivers held. He believed that the highest happiness was the reward of energy most nobly expended, but then I am not sure that, when he and I talked of human happiness, we meant precisely the

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same thing. Rivers was a poet, and we all know poets have an extraordinary faculty for believing what their enthusiasm has persuaded them to be best for other people. If the poet is sometimes a seer he too frequently sees what is not there!

The day after the lunch with Mrs. Strood at the Minerva I discussed this same question of happiness with Rivers. Like the hero of the *Æneid*, whilst I was feigning hope on my countenance I repressed deep in my heart the grief which despised love had planted there. If only for one reason it was a memorable conversation. It was then for the first time that Lawrence Rivers spoke of Miss Darley and that all my resolution was necessary to prevent me from shuddering.

'What right have you to expect happiness, John?' Rivers had asked, in consequence of some observation wrung from my tortured heart. 'The only enduring happiness is what we make for ourselves. Not one man in a hundred attains that. What men call happiness is mainly a remedy against being bored.'

But I felt that purposely his shot was aimed too low.

'When I look about me,' said I, 'I 'm chiefly conscious of "the pangs of despised love," "the law's delay," "the insolence of office," and all the other "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," for which neither religion nor science has invented a shield!'

Lawrence gave me a penetrating glance. 'John,' he said, 'you 're not looking well.'

'Merely indigestion,' I replied.

'Go down to Brighton for a day or two's rest,' he added kindly.

I shook my head, and was almost tempted to say,

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like a far greater man than myself, that I had all 'eternity to rest in'!

I was at my desk in the office. The inverted letters of the legend 'League of the Higher Citizenship' on the tall glass window overlooking the traffic of Victoria Street seemed like some unintelligible message to its depressed secretary as he read it backward. Lawrence was leaning against the mantelpiece. Over his head was a big photograph of the Second Annual Meeting of our League at the Albert Hall; to his right and left, stacks of our literature. Near the door was a small desk which he sometimes used for private papers and memoranda, and of which both he and I had a key. Suddenly, with a quick and, as it seemed to me, a nervous movement, he went to the desk, opened it, and took from it three cabinet photographs of himself, one of which had been taken from the fine portrait painted by Garrett, R.A., and exhibited in the last Academy.

'In which of these do I look least absurd, John?' he asked.

There was no doubt to my mind.

'The photograph from Garrett's portrait is the best,' said I, 'beyond all doubt. Garrett has caught something of your fire. I don't mean to be rude, Lawrence, but he seems to have taken the best of you.'

'And left out the worst, eh?' he inquired, laughing.

'Well, he has left out your platform look,' I answered, 'that seems to say "My dear sir, when the deuce will you have done talking nonsense!" Garrett's portrait isn't the Rivers of the League, but the poet of *Thalia and her Sisters*.

This poem, then being widely read, had been lately published.

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Rivers laid the portraits on the table and inspected them.

'You're right, John, as usual. Garrett's flatters me the most, and Lord! how we do love it.'

'What do you want it for?' I asked.

'To send it to your friend, Miss Darley,' said he.

'Do you think she's pretty?' I asked, bent on torturing myself.

'Pretty, John? She's lovely!—one of those rare creatures who diffuse the sense of peace and beauty about them!'

I shuddered. Years ago I had heard him use almost the same words of Diana Leighton.

'She's generally considered rather charming,' said I.

'Rather charming!' he protested. 'You're the sort of fellow who describes the moonlight as "rather nice"!'

'I've learned the danger of over-statement, Lawrence,' said I, with admirably assumed serenity. 'There are vices for which only poets can take out licences.'

He laughed, patted me on the shoulder, told me to put the photograph in a strong envelope and then sat down and wrote a long letter which he enclosed therein.

'What,' he asked, 'is Miss Darley's number?'

'Seven,' I replied, without a quaver.

'Seven? How appropriate!' he answered. 'Weren't there seven wonders of the world? By the bye, John, I'm lunching there to-morrow.'

'Are you sending your picture to consecrate the feast?' said I.

'I'm sending it because the lady wants it.'

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Then he left the office, glowing with high spirits and apparent happiness. But over my heart the 'buses in Victoria Street seemed to be rolling.

There are fakirs whom their own vows condemn to swing from hooks inserted beneath their shoulder-blades. Similarly there are strong souls who, ordained by fate, inflict like punishment on their own bruised hearts. I knew my duty. There was a hero's part to play; why should not I play it?

Throughout the day, and even during my sleep at night, this resolve loomed on me.

Since it was clear that swinging from my hook must become an almost daily occupation, I determined to perform the feat as gracefully as fortitude and practice might permit. The day after Lawrence met Charis Darley at lunch was a busy one at the League. We were preparing for a great meeting of the affiliated societies from the provinces, and both the subjects to be discussed and those it seemed politic to avoid had caused much debate and correspondence. When, however, the clatter of the typewriter in the adjoining room had become subdued and the letters had been dispatched I asked Rivers how he had enjoyed the lunch at Chelsea.

Miss Leigh, the aunt, I observed, was rather a shadowy personage, but one presenting withal a background of delicate grey for the display of her niece's beauty of outline and brilliancy of colouring.

Swing though I must from the hook, I used what anodynes I could to relieve the ache, and found them in the metaphors which deaden impact with reality.

Rivers agreed that the aunt was one of those

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women of diaphanous personality. 'There are moments,' he said, 'when we forget that they have bodies.'

'It's because they almost persuade themselves that they haven't,' said I.

'All the same it's the spirit within that shapes the body without,' he replied. 'Women untouched by passion, love, or maternity recede from reality and inhabit a twilight land which no psychologist has yet explored.'

'Will Miss Darley lose herself in that pale land of ghosts?' I asked.

'Heavens, man!' he exclaimed, 'what an idea!'

'She might,' I insisted, 'if she never meets the right man.'

'She'll meet dozens, John! She'd die of moral anæmia in the sallow wilderness.'

'You mean she'll marry,' I said.

'Of course she will.'

'I wonder whom?'

Rivers looked at me keenly, probably for signs of greater meaning than manner implied.

'If there were only one man in the world,' he said, 'he would have to marry her if she wanted him.'

'You mean she'd make him?'

'Make him? Yes, but unconsciously—as the law of gravitation makes the apple fall.'

'The same law,' said I, 'is responsible for the avalanche!'

'These are dark sayings, John!' said he.

I had turned his thoughts to his allegiance to Diana Leighton. Behind his words I felt the shadow of compunction.

'I'm glad,' said I (my legs were off the ground,

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the hook struck deep!), 'I 'm glad you 're interested in Charis Darley. I wonder what you talked about?'

Rivers laughed.

'Chiefly about you!'

'So far as she 's concerned,' said I, 'I 'm a shadow in the desert with the maiden-aunts!'

'I don't think she quite places you there, John,' said he, still smiling, 'for she told me you were one of those men who want "a nice kindly woman" to look after them. She even suggested that it was my duty to find one!'

'Ha! ha! ha!' I laughed, quite jovially.

'There was a time,' Rivers resumed, 'when I imagined you were a little *épris*—I 'm talking French, John, to spare your feelings!'

'What made you imagine that?'

'Something Mrs. Strood said. You 're not, are you?'

I laughed boldly.

'I 'll marry Miss Darley when she asks me,' I answered. 'Tell her so, Lawrence, to remove all doubts.'

'I don't think I 'll tempt her with dangerous knowledge,' he replied, laughing too.

This conversation will doubtlessly be taken by some of Rivers's critics as evidence of his selfishness. Had he thought less of himself, they will say, he must have guessed his secretary's pitiful plight.

Cannot you hear the voice of malice saying, behind a grin, 'Rivers cut out his silly little secretary'?

One brute—a member of the League—said it at the time, but Rivers never heard it. But the

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explanation is very simple. My friend held too high an opinion of the strength of my character to think me capable of such weakness. There are men whose practical good sense is so highly developed that it is impossible even for the most penetrating observer to associate them with the follies of love. Of these I seemed one. Even my stepmother—the only witness of my melancholy exploit—believed that my frustrated attempt to win Miss Darley for a wife sprang rather out of a desire to secure my own social position than to appease the longings of my heart. It was, therefore, because Rivers respected me so much and not because he was 'the colossal egoist' his enemies pretended, that he was spared a knowledge which would most profoundly have distressed him.

But enough of myself and my feelings.

I am loth to criticise Miss Darley's conduct. It is explicable and excusable only if we assume that she became enamoured of Rivers before she knew him. I have no claims to read the secret of a girl's heart when my own remains so deep a mystery, but I cannot admit that it is always the holy place of which so many confiding poets have sung. Where the primitive instincts are concerned, as they are in love, the difference between the youth and maiden is one of expression rather than of kind. But the phenomena of passion are too obscure to tempt psychology to draw general conclusions. It is too often taken for granted that when love first stirs in a girl's breast another instinct which we call purity compels her to conceal it. But this concealment, a part of the scheme of attraction which we see as 'charm,' is never practised by the intelligent when

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there is danger that it may cause them to miss their goal.

Whether, after their second meeting, Miss Darley attempted to hide her feelings from Rivers is a question of which I have no knowledge; at the same time the step taken by her aunt greatly increases my doubts.

Miss Leigh called to see Mrs. Strood, who, to my extreme secret pain, insisted that I should be present at their interview.

It chanced that I was sitting in my father's study reading Metchinskoff's *The Nature of Man*, a work from which in my sorrow I derived considerable consolation. The physiological disharmony to which that able writer indirectly attributes so much human aberration consoled me all the more deeply because I had arrived at the same conclusion although guided by very different processes of observation.

Whilst I was absorbed in these (to the optimist) melancholy studies, suddenly my stepmother entered the room.

'John!' she said abruptly, 'Miss Leigh is here. She seems bothered about her niece and Mr. Rivers, and I've told her you are the only man likely to set her anxieties at rest.'

As I crossed the hall to the drawing-room I said to myself, 'Wherever the personality of Lawrence Rivers enters peace flees!'

'You might have left me out of it,' I whispered.

'I've my duty to do,' she returned dryly.

A part of it, I fear, was spiteful. She seemed bent on giving me a lesson.

She spoke with her hand on the door. As she opened it her frown changed for an air of confidence-

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provoking sympathy whilst I shook hands with Miss Leigh as cheerfully as I could.

Then we sat down and approached the delicate subject which Mrs. Strood most barbarously handled.

'You must know, John,' she began—and I prepared to swing fakir-like from my hook—'that Miss Leigh is just a little anxious about her niece.'

'About Miss Darley,' I interrupted in a straightforward, simple manner intended to allay apprehensions.

Miss Leigh inclined her little grey head.

'I'm so inexperienced in these matters,' she said.

'Exactly,' put in my stepmother. 'I have just been telling Miss Leigh that Mr. Rivers as a poet and man of genius (for it is that side of him that impresses us all most) shares the weaknesses of his class!'

'Byron, Shelley, and all that, you mean,' murmured Miss Leigh. 'What *am* I to do?'

The appeal was to me.

'Lawrence Rivers is neither as selfish as Byron nor as erratic as Shelley,' I replied impartially, 'but he believes in people following what old-fashioned novelists used to call "the dictates of their hearts."'

This was a dismal caricature of Lawrence, but the situation wrung it from me.

'You must admit, John,' said my stepmother sweetly, 'that Mr. Rivers is extraordinarily fascinating to women when he thinks it worth his while.'

'Some of his poems about love,' murmured Miss Leigh, 'are beautiful, others, I fear, a little coarse. A man's nature is generally reflected in his work. I have done, I'm afraid, Mr. Strood, a very unconventional thing. I came here for guidance.'

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She glanced at me nervously. I wondered what sort of advice she expected.

But my stepmother intervened.

'The trouble is this, John,' she said—'and I'm sure that Miss Leigh will forgive me for putting it bluntly. There is some reason for fearing that Miss Darley may be brought—dangerously brought—under the attractions of your friend. As we were instrumental in making them acquainted a certain responsibility rests with us. Miss Leigh now wishes to know whether Mr. Rivers is an entirely safe and suitable associate for Miss Darley. To this naturally I am unable to reply. What can I know of the private life of one so tempted and flattered by women of all classes as Mr. Rivers always has been? All I can see is that he's brilliant, charming, and delightful, but whether a young woman whose aim in life is marriage can enjoy his society without—well—getting herself unpleasantly talked about and sacrificing the maidenly dignity which, when I was a girl, we all most dearly prized, is a matter on which my inexperience of the world unfits me to offer an opinion!'

'O most insidious stepmother!' I thought, 'how you enjoyed that speech.'

I glanced at Miss Leigh, and perhaps because I perceived that my stepmother had dragged the subject into a light to which it was never intended to be submitted, answered generously.

'Lawrence Rivers is a very noble fellow,' I said; 'the women who enjoy his society must profit by it.'

Miss Leigh looked relieved.

'Intellectually?' she murmured.

My stepmother seemed annoyed.

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'Morally?' she asked.

'Yes,' I replied sturdily, 'both intellectually and morally.'

My stepmother maintained with an effort her air of amiable sympathy.

'I'm afraid,' she said, 'we are not quite keeping to the point, which so far as Miss Darley is concerned is this: Does Mr. Rivers intend to marry (some of his views are, to say the least of them, peculiar), or does he propose to get all the pleasure he can out of life without incurring its obligations?'

Miss Leigh's face fell.

'That, Mr. Strood,' she said, 'is what is chiefly troubling me as Charis's aunt.'

Again a generous spirit spurred me on.

'Then don't let it trouble you,' I exclaimed warmly. 'Forgive me for saying so, Miss Leigh, but Miss Darley is quite able to take care of herself, and Lawrence Rivers incapable of a mean act.'

'Even with a woman?' muttered my stepmother.

'Even with a woman,' I repeated firmly.

'What of poor Mrs. Leighton?' she asked.

Miss Leigh's pale face flickered uneasily.

I had forgotten Diana, but still the tide of self-abnegation swept me on.

'Whatever my friend's relations with Mrs. Leighton may have been, he will have learned from them nothing ignoble. Lawrence is a man of scrupulous honour. Women of the most delicate moral organisation know this by instinct, and therefore trust him.'

'But the question is,' snapped my stepmother, 'but the question is, whether Mr. Rivers is a marry-

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ing man. That's what interests people with girls to look after!'

'A marrying man!' I exclaimed. 'What man shall say of himself that he is a marrying man? It depends on circumstances, opportunities, the meeting of sympathies which possibly miss. But Lawrence is as likely to marry as another; besides he has the claims of the Beckstone property to consider.'

'The facts are these, Miss Leigh,' said my stepmother firmly, 'and it's no good blinking at them because they're unpleasant. As far as a man can be bound to a woman with a husband still living, Mr. Rivers is bound to Mrs. Leighton. If Mr. Leighton were to die it's an understood thing that he would marry her. People say that's what he is waiting for. It is this unfortunate situation which renders Mr. Rivers's attentions to a young woman compromising. He expects them to understand how things are, and, if they're prepared to meet him half-way, he naturally tells himself it's done at their risks. This is how men reason, although their loyalty to one another won't allow them to admit it—and poets are the worst of the lot!'

Under this *douche* poor Miss Leigh shivered; views of life were here thrust upon her notice from which her delicacy shrank. She glanced at me as it were for protection and I raised my shield.

'With the common herd,' I said, 'with men of shallow mind and undeveloped moral feeling what my stepmother has said is almost true; but even with the average man in questions of obligation arising from such relations with virtuous women it is never safe to generalise. On the other hand men

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of Lawrence's exalted character are entirely removed from these base standards. Rivers is one who gives all or nothing. No man living has a higher respect for women; few men's ideals have been less understood.'

I spoke with warmth. A faint colour rose in Miss Leigh's face.

'Thank you, Mr. Strood,' she said; 'you have greatly relieved my mind. I have, moreover, the greatest respect for Charis's character and cleverness. What you have told me has made me see that any interference on my part would be worse than useless. Thank you very much for your advice. Good-bye.'

Then she shook hands with us both and faded from the room.

'She's even sillier than you are!' exclaimed my stepmother turning to me from the bell on which she had just thrust an irritable finger.

'Surely,' said I, 'you didn't expect me to malign my friend out of pique.'

'Nonsense!' she retorted. 'Of all forms of vanity that of sham duty discharged at sham personal sacrifice is the most odious! The girl, I suppose, must be allowed to throw herself at the man's head and take the consequences. As for you and your love affairs I 've done with them—unless you 're prepared to marry the aunt! A nice couple you 'd make! She can't touch the realities of life with a pair of tongs whilst you make a hero of a man who, if he were honest, would start a harem and appoint you his door-keeper!'

I preserved my dignity and, I hope, my temper,

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although I addressed her as madam (from mummie to madam—what a drop!).

'You have said,' I told her, 'more than I am prepared to hear even from my father's wife. I will leave you to think over your words, and trust after reflection that you will end in seeing the injustice you have done me!'

Nor was I mistaken.

On that same evening I received a letter from her. It was, she said, foolish for us to quarrel. She had intended me to marry Charis Darley. We all had our ambitions for those whose happiness we desired. If she had failed in hers it was not her fault.

It was a clever enough letter and meant that we could not afford to quarrel. Recognising the weight of her unuttered argument, I replied by apologising for the hastiness of my temper and requesting her to forget the unkind things wrung from me in the heat of the moment.

It is thus that humanity represses the instincts of primitive pugnacity.

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CHAPTER XX

TWO sides of Lawrence Rivers have been concealed from me, either purposely or out of that strange shyness of the heart from which few are free. I was never admitted into the penetralia of his mind wherein Diana Leighton had been enshrined; the withering votive offerings on the temple walls were unseen by me.

Diana was in Rome in generous exile, fearing her presence should obstruct the smooth course of his career. In Rivers, as a social reformer endeavouring to teach his countrymen a new ideal of citizenship, critics tried to see something of an amateur. He was an aristocrat; he was rich; he was a poet; he had no 'axe to grind' nor anything in common with the professional politician. Papers like the *Times* pretended not to take him too seriously, but this was rather because he was working in novel grooves outside the ring of party than that his work was ineffective. Both by his poems and his work in the League he had touched the consciences of his countrymen who had power to think. His public acts are too fresh in the public knowledge for me to repeat details already well known. My aim—an aim which grows clearer as I write—is to show you the man where he touched the emotional side of life. For unless we know something of his feeling for Diana

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Leighton, and make allowances for the influence on his character which Charis Darley exercised before that derived from the earlier sources had died out, much of his poetry will be obscure. For example, those three strange poems, 'Doubt,' 'Dread,' 'Dare,' become intelligible only when read by the light thrown on them by certain passages from the history of his own heart.

What right have we—and I once more plunge into the language of metaphors which wound least sensitive souls still feeding on his memory—what right have we, I ask, to say that a man (and such a man!) should raise only one shrine to the love of woman?

Fate ordained that Lawrence Rivers should raise two, and that I (his 'little secretary with the withered smile'!) should see them abuilding. The last ominous structure sprung indeed from the ruins of my own heart, yet was I loyal enough never to curse the architect.

On this achievement let vulgar minds throw shallow ridicule, but those who look beneath the surface of things will only see a sacrifice paid by loyalty to friendship. I had been, as it were, a nurse of Lawrence's enthusiasm since I first saw it blaze forth at Oxford. Was it for me to try to crush it, or worse still, to poison it by hint and innuendo because destiny made me its obscure victim?

What a man feels for a woman or for women is often the key of his character. This was the case with Shelley. It is still more true of Lawrence Rivers. My duty as his biographer, therefore, is to make this clear, and not to cry out and show my own gaping wounds because my affections were

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dashed to the dust by the rush of his triumphant car.

Some men of dominant character claim many victims. In the case of Lawrence Rivers I know only of two—Diana Leighton and myself.

The early summer came. The League of the Higher Citizenship flourished; both political parties courted us, but Rivers as yet would not let us yield to either.

'They've smothered the British citizen under catch-words,' he said; 'neither of them ever yet tried to teach him the first elements of civic duty!'

His speeches at this time were full of fire but few guessed where the fuel was gathered.

I know not why Rivers ceased to confide in me, but love—especially successful love in a proud nature—needs not the solace of sentimental gossip. If he rarely spoke to me of Charis Darley, although they were meeting almost daily, it was not because he then mistrusted me. Yet who knows what she may have told him? She had her own part to play, her own goal to reach. The Lydian maiden who challenged Athene to the weaving match was not more subtle. What strange fabric woven of love, hope, and fear, may not Charis have hung before his admiring eyes? I was only a pawn in the game. Shall I complain because she used me as one?

What man following his own inclinations has not stifled the voice of shame? Rivers guessed that I knew how he was abandoning an older allegiance for the charm of a younger spell. It is enough for me to repeat, without further explanation, that his confidence in me ceased as he wandered along the path where Charis Darley was beckoning him.

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History indeed was repeating itself. Just as he had placed a ring round himself and Diana Leighton he now rebuilt the barrier to keep me out.

In both cases I was able to look over the fence.

It must not be imagined that because a troubled and intricate moment in his affections removed me from my friend's confidence that he was the less solicitous for my welfare. On the contrary, he made an effort to secure my future happiness, which I know Charis Darley suggested.

How far this view is justified will now be shown.

In June Rivers summoned me to Beckstone Park, perhaps for other reasons than those he gave. The staff in Victoria Street could deal with the business of the League, but I was necessary for his own correspondence, public and private.

At Beckstone there were several guests (the names of most I have forgotten), among them Charis Darley and her aunt.

Although I frequently met Miss Leigh, and called occasionally at Chelsea, since Miss Darley had refused me I had not sought, although I made no effort to avoid her society. This I felt was due to us both. When we did meet, however, her manner was very gracious. If I may use the word in such associations she was propitiatory. She almost seemed to say, 'You know too much but you gave me a promise and I trust you to keep it.'

The suspicion that I had a certain power over her I admit pleased me, though, I trust, not to the extent of meanness. My manner never said to her: 'Miss Darley, if I were to tell Lawrence Rivers how you used his secretary as a sort of stalking-horse to bring him within your range where would you be?' If

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such an idea entered my mind it went no further. For the thoughts it suggested were mean and revengeful. They also pointed to a futile policy. For suppose a sore and humiliated spirit had tempted me to tell Lawrence, what would have happened? Would he have seen any grave offence in conduct so flattering to himself? Certainly not. 'These,' he would have said, 'are woman's weapons. I regret that they have wounded you, but it is all the fortune of the eternal war of sex.' For if there were a weak side to my friend's character it was the over-indulgent allowances which he was always ready to make for women.

'Because women are beautiful,' I once protested (the conversation indirectly referred to Diana Leighton), 'is no reason why we should tolerate their deceit!'

'You will never understand women,' he replied. 'What you unkindly call "deceit" is only a devious and indirect way (they think it unseen!) of seeking what their hearts are clamouring for. Women, John, are the worst victims of the artificial social arrangement which assumes that it is immodest to claim what their natures most ardently seek. So they are driven, poor loving souls, to win it by stealth!'

If Miss Darley had understood Lawrence's broad views on the relations of the sexes as well as I did, I wonder whether she would have thought it worth while to treat me with such deference and respect! I am no cynic, for I saw a more generous reason for her amiability! Was not my heart among the trophies which she had a right to hang up in the Temple of Vanities?

But if I were anxious to protect Rivers against

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Miss Darley it was not for my own sake. I saw Diana Leighton's beautiful eyes under the shadow of dark brows and fading hair turned to me beseechingly. She seemed to say, 'Save me from the raids of this beautiful pirate.'

I seemed the sole witness of an unequal conflict in which two women were striving after one man.

All such battles have been generous in bribes. That is why a more ignoble nature than my own might have suspected Charis Darley of purchasing a silence which, even had it been broken, could have done her no harm.

I found Rivers playing the host charmingly as usual. The weather was fine; gardens and park were riotous with the beauty which slowly receding spring and swift-coming summer strew on field and forest, quiet river-banks and grassy mountain-side—the time when the heart of youth leaps and the roses bloom. But my heart, alas! had leaped in vain, my roses were fallen. What consolations were left for me? Yet sometimes even when we see them least they are nearest at hand.

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"better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all."'

Since those days I have learned much.

Of all the illusory phenomena of man's conscious life love is the arch-dissembler. Yet for this ghostlike hunger there is no remedy but an unsubstantial feast.

Rivers broke the silence.

'I have been thinking about you a good deal, John,' he said.

On the lawn where Charis Darley sat Dryad-like under the yew I seemed to see a cause of this interest. What had she told him?

'It's good of you, Lawrence,' I replied.

'There's this business of the League,' he went on; 'we want to keep its inner organisation as much in our hands as possible. For this we need devoted workers who see with our eyes, not hirelings from the half-loyal ranks of political Nonconformity—friends of Barker and other malignant misinterpreters of our motives.'

I agreed with him.

'I've talked over these matters with Miss Leigh and her niece,' he went on, 'ardent Leaguers, as you know. I have often thought—in fact, you and I have discussed it—that our organisation is weak where it should be strongest. The female sense of national duty in England is at the lowest ebb. The women who rule a society which they are rapidly rendering decrepit are the worst enemies of higher civic ideals.'

'They've no ideals,' said I, 'only caprices. These polished barbarians, living in ill-enjoyed flimsy luxury from which the sense of domesticity has been driven, and into which that of culture can't enter, have no higher ideals than to find men to pay their bills.'

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'You are hard on them, John,' he replied; 'but there are bitter moments when we can only see the worst types, of which too many are on the top. Remember there are others. We know some—here he glanced towards the yew-tree, and perhaps inwardly at the lady in Rome—'who can help us more than men. Such women are many times more subtle than we are. They are the builders of the atmospheres we breathe. We stumble awkwardly in the kingdom they rule. All this means, John, that the League is too weak on one side. To strengthen it I've decided to introduce a female element.'

'In what shape?' I asked.

'In a secretary and a ladies' branch,' he replied.

Then he pointed out that the work of the League had already become a task too much for one man, however capable and industrious—for Rivers never forgot to recognise my services by generous appreciation.

The lady with whom he had been carrying on negotiations (chiefly through Miss Darley, I inferred) had once been secretary of the Guild of Good Deeds, a society started for the purpose of raising the standard of the masses by the example of the classes.

'It died for want of public support,' said I.

'I know,' said he.

'What is the lady's name?' I asked.

Mrs. Tracy Hill was the lady's name.

'Widow of the late Professor Tracy Hill?' I inquired.

'I believe so,' said he.

'Then I've heard of her,' said I. 'The professor, an ingenious Egyptologist, left her a considerable fortune. To a reasonable extent she has been

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devoting it to good works. When he was alive she acted as secretary to her husband—an amiable and able old gentleman considerably older than herself, whom I once met at a soirée of the Geographical Society. Mrs. Hill is a capable woman of considerable personal attraction, and, I 've no doubt, under a little guidance, Lawrence, might learn to help us on the League.'

'For guidance, John, she will have to look to you,' he answered quietly. 'But Mrs. Hill is coming to stay here for a few days, really for the purpose of meeting you, for unless you find her efficient, it would be unwise of us to invite her to be your colleague. Talk the matter over with her, John, and see what can be done. The decision rests with you.'

I admit that I was flattered by this proof of his confidence. Often Rivers arrived at important decisions concerning the League and its politics without consulting me until it was too late. But apart from the sense of official satisfaction I even felt a more subtle thrill of pride. Might there not be behind my friend a new guiding influence that more fully recognised my merit? Now, although Rivers had always done me more than justice in words, he had by his acts scarcely admitted my judgment to the same high place in his respect. Miss Darley may not have been sufficiently impressed by my position and appearance to choose me for her husband, but I instinctively felt that she fully appreciated my qualities as a man of the world dealing with a difficult and intricate task.

A woman's impressions in this direction are often safer as well as shrewder than a man's. Rivers, I guessed, had discussed his scheme for a ladies'

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branch of the League with Miss Darley; Miss Darley had recommended Mrs. Tracy Hill, 'only,' she no doubt added, 'leave the final decision with John Strood.'

This imagined explanation of Lawrence's conduct proved correct, for a little later when I paid my respects to Miss Darley, she said, 'I do hope you will like Mrs. Tracy Hill, Mr. Strood, for I'm responsible for bringing you together.'

Then she proceeded to praise her friend for the powers of her mind and the generosity of her character.

'She may seem a little hard,' she added, 'in her manner when you first know her. Most women compelled to deal with the stern business of life do, but she has the greatest admiration for the work you have done on the League, and her ambition would be satisfied if she could work under you!'

'It's very nice of you to say so, Miss Darley,' I replied. 'I've always done my best, often in the face of much sullen opposition. It is a relief to feel that, in sparing Lawrence as much as possible, my work has been recognised by so intelligent observers as Mrs. Tracy Hill.'

Mrs. Tracy Hill arrived in the afternoon when we were all taking tea on the lawn. There were, I remember, seven or eight guests, young men and women devoted, unless their conversation misrepresented their tastes, to golf, bridge, cricket, hockey, croquet, tennis, or other branches of sport. They were all very modern and representative. Rivers, Miss Darley, Mrs. Tracy Hill, and myself were modern too, but on the side of thought and culture. Between the two groups I was conscious of a

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crossed easily by Lawrence and Miss Darley, but impassable by Mrs Tracy Hill and myself. I hated this fanaticism for games; so did she. I lamented the love of solemn trifling which makes English life seem so absurd to unprejudiced observers. She agreed with me.

Games, I observed, were ceasing to be pastimes and becoming highly organised popular ceremonies. We were approaching the 'loaf and circus' which demoralised the Roman populace.

There was no greater evidence of national deterioration, she admitted, than this glorification of sport.

Thus we met on grounds of not ignoble sympathy.

I had once endeavoured to persuade Lawrence Rivers to devote the machinery of the League to attack the excessive love of sport, to which I maintained our national dullness was due. There were unfortunately national weaknesses of which he failed to see the evil. His contention was that the wrong people played games; not that they were overplayed. Divert some of the stream of athleticism from the public schools to the board schools, he argued, and you would strike a healthy balance.

From the youthful opponent of compulsory cricket this view struck me as weak.

I trust the reader of these pages will not imagine that my respect for Rivers had changed because my sense of proportion compels me at times to differ from his views, and I especially hope that my most malignant critics, tempted by the spirit of meanness, may not attribute to jealousy opinions formed after the closest and most impartial observation of my friend's methods. Not once have I allowed the fact

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that Miss Darley preferred him to me to cloud my judgment. This I repeat with a clear conscience.

As a leader in the broader principles of our national life Rivers has had few equals in my generation, but in the details of conduct I still venture to maintain that his teaching would have often been more effective had he followed my advice.

This view, to my surprise and gratification, I found that Mrs. Tracy Hill shared. The discovery was made at our first conversation.

We had wandered away together, and were leaning over the terrace of the lawn which looked down on other lawns below. On one were two tennis-courts, on another croquet hoops glistened in the slanting rays of the sun. Beyond, in the park, red and white flags fluttered over the well-kept greens of a private golf-course.

'Everywhere temples to the gods of British sport!' exclaimed Mrs. Hill.

'Yes,' said I, 'the old Squire was an ardent sportsman.'

'I know,' she returned; 'but what a strange fancy of Mr. Rivers to ask *them* to meet *us*!'

Then Mrs. Hill glanced back at the others. They were gathered round their host who was talking. Their laughter reached us. It seemed meaningless to both.

'Lawrence,' said I, 'has odd whims at times. He delights in contrasts.'

'And then,' replied Mrs. Hill (I think with unnecessary meaning), 'he has Miss Darley's taste to consult!'

'I don't know that,' I replied, again loyally on the defensive; 'but he is wonderfully tolerant.'

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'Tolerant—yes,' my new friend replied. 'But what can he see in those young men and women. They are clever, well-dressed, well-built, excellent specimens of the race as human animals; but beyond, what is there?—a bundle of silly ambitions which bats and balls, clubs and bunkers, hoops and mallets, and a little futile dexterity of hand and eye may satisfy. How can the nation profit by such as they, Mr. Strood?'

The same question had often filled me with anxiety.

I paused to consider it, but before my answer came she resumed her indictment.

'Those young people will marry some day, Mr. Strood—unless they are too selfish to undertake the obligations of matrimony—and those young women will bring into the world (in limited and dwindling numbers) boys and girls animated by similar sporting fanaticisms.'

'What then is the remedy, Mrs. Hill?' I asked. 'Must this cult go on till the proletariat rise in disgust and shake an enfeebled State to its foundations, because it is no longer able to give them worthy rulers, or will a stronger race push us from our place, and leave us to appease our starving souls on the glories of the bat and ball, the cleek and the bunker?'

'There is only one remedy,' replied Mrs. Tracy Hill. 'The duties of the Higher Citizenship must be brought home to every mother in England.'

Thus with great skill this able, patriotic, and most attractive lady brought me to the object of her visit. Need I say that I hurried more than half-way to meet her?

Already I was anticipating the pleasure of working

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with a kindred and sympathetic colleague of the other sex! Already a sense of well-being was invading a consciousness which Charis Darley had so ruthlessly devastated!

Mrs. Tracy Hill, moreover, filled me with a sense of power. If such a word as female-virility existed I would select it to express my meaning. She looked down on me and smiled, for she was taller than I, although her fine stature created in me no sense of physical inferiority. Her contempt for the comely young sportsmen and their female associates had taught me that she sought elsewhere those finer sources of power which alone satisfy women of the nobler sort.

If there are moments of sorrow there are also moments of consolation when we drink from the cup generously offered long draughts of moral comfort. In life we are swept from pain to bliss by the winds of circumstance, as the seeds of earth are carried by the breezes of the physical world 'to their dark wintry beds.' Looking back it now seems that this gracious lady, so cold and proud with the undeserving, proffered me the solace for which I had long been waiting. I began to look on the world in a serener mood. Why should not Lawrence Rivers take his pastime even if Diana Leighton paid the price? Happiness is attainable only by processes of readjustment. Every one in that sunny garden, I felt, was driving or being driven towards some end. Even the young sportsmen and sportswomen may have had their own aspirations under their toughened breasts. I knew where Charis Darley was driving the car of her hopes. Was it for me to obstruct the flashing wheels of this daring charioteer?

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CHAPTER XXII

FEW biographies are free from errors of judgment. Some suppress too little, others conceal too much. Some are a record of weaknesses unsuspected by the public, others only paint with an heroic brush. It may be the fault of this biography that the writer has allowed his own personality to overshadow that of the subject of it more than a delicate sense of literary proportion should allow. But as this work proceeded I discovered that the character of Lawrence Rivers could only be justly studied through my own. The boa-constrictor coils round its prey till the monster's folds conceal the struggling victim. Similarly, I became hidden in the folds of my friend's fame. At the same time I most emphatically deny that my vanity has aught to do with my novel methods, nor do I doubt that a careful reader will fail to see that, whenever my own character looms on these pages too distinctly, it invariably brings out some quality of my friend. This, if I may say so without boasting, is the secret of my art.

Thus, in bringing about the meeting between Mrs. Tracy Hill and myself, it is clear that he expended much thought. The idea first occurred to Miss Darley, but it was Lawrence's profound power of reading the hearts of men and women that told

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him of what signal use the combined skill and energy of that most admirable lady and myself would be to the League. Now such discrimination is most rare especially in poets who are too often little more than elegant egomaniacs. It will be seen, therefore, that in the eyes of Lawrence Rivers I was a good deal more than a mere secretary, rather was I a delicate human instrument recording, as it were automatically, the movements and changes in his own mind.

I spent a delightful week at Beckstone Park. If Rivers had been the indirect cause of flooding my soul with darkness he now made himself the direct means of dispelling the gloom. Whether this was design or accident I will decide after it has been made clear to me that, in the complex interests of the human mind with which I am dealing, it is possible to disentangle their obscure operations.

Every day it became clearer to me that Sophia Tracy Hill and myself were guided by the same standards of life. That Miss Darley and Rivers were conscious of this too was made equally plain by their desire to bring us into the same field.

To regard Rivers as a mere encourager of reckless marriages, however, would be too absurd; to describe Charis Darley as a matchmaker almost equally inaccurate; but that in this aspect my benevolent friend was deeply impressed by the fitness of our sympathies is a matter, to my mind, beyond dispute.

On the last night of my visit, instead of joining his other guests in the smoking-room after dinner he took me to the library and, pushing me back into a big armchair in the smiling, masterful manner that

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he often adopted towards me, said, 'Sit there, John, and listen to me.'

I leaned back in silent acquiescence.

'Have you ever thought about getting married?' he asked bluntly.

I was a little embarrassed. Before I could reply, he added, 'You mustn't think, you know, that I've been deputed to ask your intentions.'

I was conscious of blushing.

'You mustn't tease me,' said I. 'Of course I've thought about marriage—what man hasn't? I've often thought about yours.'

'Never mind mine,' he replied. 'You have wandered so recklessly into the well-preserved coverts where marriages are made that they are all talking of you.'

I blushed again.

'I'm sorry my attentions to Mrs. Tracy Hill should have excited notice,' said I. 'I trust they have not aroused the malice of any of your young friends. I suspected certain significant looks when Mrs. Hill and I were late for lunch. I was thankful they didn't cough!'

'The looks were natural,' he answered, 'the cough, I trust, restrained by good breeding. But I shouldn't be surprised if there has been betting.'

'About what?' I gasped.

'The chances of an engagement between you!'

'Good heavens!' I cried, much perturbed; 'suppose Mrs. Hill should hear!'

'If she does,' he replied coolly, 'she will have no cause to blush. There is nothing derogatory to her dignity in being attracted by such a man as yourself and taking no pains to conceal the fact.'

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I heard him in wonder.

'All men are underlings in the scheme of life and must obey,' he went on.

'Obey women?' I asked.

'Certainly, when they call on us to complete our destiny and their own.'

'But what about you, Lawrence?' I asked boldly; 'you don't (if I may say so) hear them calling, and Beckstone needs an heir.'

'I thought we agreed that my name was not on the list,' he answered gravely.

'I know,' I said, a little nervously, 'things are different with you because you 're Lawrence Rivers.'

'Then kindly leave me out of the question till my time comes,' he replied. 'Marriage is like death—no one knows how near it may be.'

'That 's a dismal view of the other human necessity!' said I.

'I intended it for a cheerful one,' said he. 'You see, John, I am anxious you shouldn't shut your eyes and run like a mountain-goat to stonier pastures than those you 're invited to browse on!'

Then I felt myself tingling all over as I interpreted my friend's meaning into the reckless language of surprise.

'You don't,' I exclaimed, 'you don't think Sophia Tracy Hill really wants to marry me?'

'Ask her and see,' Rivers replied.

'But she has only known me a week!'

'You will learn that much is possible in seven days, John, especially if you read Genesis.'

'How do you know?' I asked, strangely agitated. 'Sophia is not the sort of woman to be inspired by a sudden passion for any man.'

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'Passion is sometimes too violent a word to convey love's secrets, John. But Mrs. Tracy Hill is a widow of two years' standing; she is also the widow of an elderly man. Widows may have their romances as well as maids, even if they are pitched in a lower key.'

'But, Lawrence,' I stammered—for I was conscious of a certain under-current of dismay in the situation —'but, Lawrence, I can't afford to keep a wife!'

'Mrs. Tracy Hill has more than enough for two, John. Marriages are not all serenades, roses, and nightingales—'tis, alas! a poet who speaks. It may be a convenient assortment of the sexes for reasons which the Prayer Book specifies, although the measure has been offered you in a less ingenuous cup. John, my friend, I have no right to say more, nor can I do so without betraying confidences tapped in your interests. After what I have told you it seems to me there 's only one course for you to take. If you fail in your duty you will forfeit the respect of more than one of your friends. Need I say more! I leave you to think it over. I 'm going to join our young critics in the smoking-room. Good-night.'

Then he walked out of the room, leaving me alone with a most agitating discovery but warmed inwardly with the novel glow which, if it means anything, is a prognostic of approaching happiness.

But why had my friend done this thing?

Because, no doubt, in the first case Charis Darley had set him on! But afterwards because his tender nature could not endure to see a woman's heart suffer in silence when an effort of his might find a remedy for the pang.

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Rivers, I remembered, had actually ordered me to propose to Sophia Tracy Hill under penalty, if I refused, of losing his friendship!

Yet critics are not wanting who have dared to describe him as an egomaniac!

Surely this attempt to spare a woman of noble character the sorrows which unrequited love may bring is sufficient answer to them.

That night I turned on a sleepless pillow. Was Sophia, I wondered, tossing on an equally restless couch? I glanced at her furtively at the breakfast table but was relieved to see the serenity of her face untroubled. Hers was a strong, deep nature, concealing sorrow as a sleeping pool hides the secrets beneath its placid surface.

But I knew what was expected of me. A voice whispered, 'There is no time to lose.' But could a man ask a woman to be his wife after a week's acquaintance? But why not—in such a case? Sympathy not days should be the force to guide the feelings. Sophia Tracy Hill was a widow who knew the world. She also must know the message which had been conveyed to me. It was no rape of the Sabine matrons. I too had been a victim in love's wars although my heart bore no dishonourable scars!

'I've arranged for you to go by the eleven train, John, as you wished,' said Rivers. 'Mrs. Tracy Hill is going up at the same time. This will be pleasanter for you both.'

I seemed to feel the hands of destiny shaping its ends but beneath the apparent calm there lurked a feeling of suspense. I saw the future through a cloud. Behind the rolling mists I beheld such fair

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prizes as Prosperity, Domesticity, and Congenial Work.

Mrs. Tracy Hill appeared on the lawn prepared for the journey. The air of refined restraint in her dress pleased me. It seemed an implied criticism on the excess of finery to which my eye was too accustomed. The severity of a plain felt hat unrelieved by a feather, the fall of a short brown skirt to the top of stout brown boots, the precision of a man's double collar and blue-and-white tie all told their tale. Not perhaps a flattering tale (except to myself) but one revealing the simple strength of a brave and practical nature.

What more could I ask in a travelling companion?

'I hear, Mr. Strood,' she said, 'that you are good enough to see me safely to Paddington.'

I glanced at the front door and saw them placing our luggage in the smart omnibus used to convey guests to and from the station.

My modest bag was supported by her solid trunks, 'containing,' as I afterwards learned, 'chiefly books and papers.'

Rivers and his guests, standing on the threshold, wished us good-bye. Their encouraging smiles followed us down the drive.

'How beautiful the rhododendrons are,' said I to dispel the gathering sense of shyness which such a departure must bear with it, 'and how the bees are humming! The world is at its best.'

The thought 'How much does she think I know?' oppressed me. The sequel to it, 'If she knows what I know, what does she expect me to do?' added to the weight of the first doubt.

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'Love,' I said to myself, 'love—at least at the outset—has everything but calm.'

For I recalled that rash evening in March and the scene in the rose-pink room at Chelsea. That gave me pause. But then that attempt had been unsolicited—but this? Delicacy would not permit me to complete the thought.

The omnibus rolled on through the summer morning. The hedges were pink and white with dog-roses. Thrushes were singing in the coppices, larks above the waving meadow-grasses.

Twenty minutes' drive brought us to the station, where surreptitiously (for I felt that the act would have vexed her reasonable economic mind) I exchanged the return half of my second-class ticket for a first.

'Shall I get you some papers?' I asked.

'No, thank you,' she said. 'I have my book—if I should want it.'

Was there a faint emphasis on the 'if'? I could not be sure. Feeling expresses itself in spite of ourselves. Does the wild bird know when it calls to its future mate? Certainly whether Sophia Tracy Hill needed the book or not might depend on me.

'What are you reading?' I asked.

'*First Conditions of Human Prosperity*,' she answered. 'Do you know it?'

'Yes,' I answered. 'The author has collected much interesting evidence on the subject of diet, and discusses the problems of overcrowding and that of land tenure with considerable intelligence.'

So we stood on the platform of the little country station waiting for the train, talking about the book. The wind blew across the summer fields. The long

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line of rails, stretching apparently to infinitude, shone in the sun.

But a bell rang, a porter took charge of our hand-baggage, the train ran into the station. Then a few moments more and we were face to face in a first-class carriage, journeying—who shall say where?

To be heard above the roar of the train I was compelled to raise my voice.

Many things have occurred in railway carriages; no alert official in a peaked cap will ever reveal all their secrets. What offers of marriage have been made in them? What love has been proffered, what pleadings rejected? What—but why wonder further? I was alone with Sophia Tracy Hill (if we had been on our honeymoon the guard could not have closed the door with a greater air of protective decision) conscious, yes, fully conscious, that something was expected of me.

She placed *First Conditions of Human Prosperity* on the seat beside her, and gazed over her right shoulder on the landscape through which we were rushing. She saw a winding river with poplar and pollarded willows, green moist meadows with grazing cattle, thatched cottages with white-washed walls, church-spires springing above tall elms, and afar off, to the south, the line of purple hills that closed the horizon to the gazer from the terraced walks at Beckstone Park. She saw all this, but what else did she see with the eye that looks within?

I watched her face as a meteorologist watches the sky for a sign. Though she fixed her gaze on the green fields a certain faint flutter of her eyelids told me that her thoughts were not centred there.

'Sophia!'

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The spell was broken. Above the rattle of the train I had pronounced her name!

She turned her face full on me but with unbroken calm.

'When a man makes a discovery of immense significance to himself and possibly to another,' I said, 'it is his duty to proclaim it although modesty should hold him back and diffidence say "No"!'

'And what discovery have you made?' she asked, without the slightest signs of the coquetry from which, on such occasions, the manner of few women is exempt; 'that is, if I have any right to ask.'

'You alone have the right,' I replied, remembering with that reflex prompting of the heart some one else who had spurned the right. 'None other has it——' Perhaps the clatter of the train drowned the half-uttered 'now.'

The look she gave me encouraged me to proceed.

'When two lives,' I continued, 'and lives such as ours, have been brought into the same channels of aim and duty by the force which the careless call coincidence and the credulous Providence, the wisdom which directs them both demands that nothing should be wasted. But, Sophia, there is only one way in which you and I can work untrammelled for the benefit of others. Divided our strength is wasted. United it will be doubled. Together we might be the driving-wheel of the League. Unborn citizens hereafter might thank us for the high lesson in civic duty we may help to teach our generation. Without us the brilliant but erratic genius of Lawrence Rivers will achieve little. Why should not you and I stand at his elbow and guide his hand? The thought is in his own mind. But,

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Sophia, we can only stand in full strength and safety there as man and wife.'

I had spoken. She bent forward and murmured, 'John! I will stand with you.'

She gave me a hand (covered by a thick brown doeskin glove). I bent forward, and, kissing her brow, said, 'Sophia! this shall seal our pact.'

And why say more? If I have said as much it is because Rivers rolled us down the pleasant slope. What had happened was due to his impelling will.

The train ran into the junction, a crowd was waiting. Two ladies and little boy in a sailor suit invaded our compartment, obstructing the growing tenderness of our converse by their intrusion. In this life we never, alas, know what we may destroy. Sophia took her book and read steadily till we reached Paddington. There I saw her into a four-wheeled cab.

But how different was our separation to our meeting. A week ago we had been strangers, now we were to be married at the earliest possible moment that the dictates of reasonable propriety permitted.

How strange it seemed!

'Are both my trunks on the cab?' Sophia asked.

'Both of them, Sophia,' I replied, lingering fondly over her name.

'Then tell him where to drive to.'

'99 Cumberland Square, Hyde Park,' said I.

Then she drove away to the well-appointed house in the fairly fashionable and opulent region which her late husband had left her—a house destined soon to become my home—whilst I, having collected my traps and hailed a hansom sought, in thoughtful mood, the solitary chambers where as a bachelor I had spent so many changing years.

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CHAPTER XXIII

I ANNOUNCED my approaching marriage promptly and by the usual channels. Two hours after it had been arranged I wrote to Rivers. 'You,' I said, 'planned it in your mind. You gave me marching orders! I set forth to victory. The trophies snatched from the dear enemy will soon adorn a domestic hearth.'

Lawrence wrote to congratulate me, playfully repudiating responsibility for the risks we were incurring. Miss Darley sent Sophia a flattering note. Evidently, in spite of her treatment of me, she had never undervalued my character. 'I know,' she said, 'no man more capable of making a woman of your energetic character and ambitions happy than Mr. Strood. He will give you the widest scope. He can take a hint and act on it, accept an idea and carry it out to its logical conclusion. With a little management you will find him neither fussy nor importunate, and I am fully persuaded that you and he will make the best of each other. "The best is yet to be."'

Sophia was gratified with everything in the letter except the last line, which she described as 'infelicitous.' Her meaning was not clear to me until I discovered from the context the reason of her disapproval.

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'Grow old along with me,
The best is yet to be.'

Unfortunately Sophia was a few years my senior; indeed, as my stepmother too frequently told me, they both were born in the same year. It is evident, then, that Miss Darley's quotation was a little maladroit. There is danger in dealing with such double-edged instruments of compliment, and I was surprised that she should have fallen into such an error, for I am unable to believe that she could have used it purposely as at one time Sophia was tempted to think.

My engagement with this able and enlightened lady conferred on me all the dignity that a prosperous alliance brings on the contracting parties. My father, of course, approved. My stepmother was 'more than satisfied.' It was such a relief to her to feel that at last I really was provided for. Mrs. Tracy Hill had complete control of her own property and could therefore dispose of it as she willed. Whether there would be a family or not, she (Mrs. Strood) was doubtful, but even without such a bond of union we (that is Sophia and I) would find sufficient happiness in carrying out Mr. Rivers's ideas in however humble a manner, and in trying to teach selfish and ignorant people that their first duty was not to themselves but to the community of which they were now a useless part.

When my father's wife offered your most delicate feelings a cushion you discovered (after being pricked) that a sharp pin was concealed under the velvet.

Of course, before entering into the family, I prepared Sophia for this. I was relieved to find her

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quite capable of holding her own. Each, I think, was a little conscious of something ridiculous in their relations, nor was it ever decided which should give precedence to the other.

My stepmother, however, was careful. It was she who struck with my future wife certain delicate bargains on which it was obviously impossible for me to insist. For instance, when the library of the late Professor Tracy Hill was prepared for my use, certain unsightly objects connected with his studies (he was an amateur in comparative anatomy) were disposed of to the managing committee of a suburban free library as the gift of the late professor 'for the encouragement of science.' The display of such forbidding 'specimens' would have made me ill, but I was unable, without reflecting on the tastes of her late husband, to tell Sophia that the things in bottles were obscene and that the fragments of anatomy ingeniously contrasted with the grinning skull of a manlike ape rather aroused my horror than appealed to my understanding as a modest follower of Darwin.

'It would not be kind, it really would not,' said my stepmother, 'to leave a man of poor John's nervous temperament alone at night with those awful things. He would end in believing the skeletons were hunting him round the table to knock out his brains with their own bones. Of course, my dear' (she learned to 'my dear' Sophia quite naturally an hour after their first meeting, which I think is the strongest evidence of domestic resolution), 'of course, my dear, John would pretend for your sake that he didn't mind being surrounded by those horrors, but at the same time it's right you

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should know the sort of man the poor fellow really is. He's nervous and dyspeptic, and wants a good deal of care.'

The results of this consultation were gratifying. The charnel aspect of the study was removed. The room was re-papered, re-decorated, and re-carpeted to receive me, whilst I, warned by my stepmother, assumed the completest air of ignorance of the changes in progress. For this I was grateful to my stepmother. I have often wondered since at the pains which one married woman will take to keep another up to the highest standard of wifely duty.

Sophia and I were both agreed that a long engagement would be foolish. Our duties on the League of the Higher Citizenship brought us into daily relations. The sooner we could legitimately dwell under one roof, the more convenient it would be for both, as she would carry out her work at home. In this view Rivers, supported by Miss Darley, my father, and my father's wife, concurred. Miss Leigh, who had a sentimental dislike of second marriages, alone was lacking in enthusiasm for the speediest termination of an engagement which, from the outset, she had watched with disfavour.

My marriage is, of course, but of indirect importance in the biography of my friend, consequently I have passed briefly over the events leading to it. It took place in August, very quietly at St. Botolph's (Paddington), where, as I afterwards ascertained, that of Tracy Hill had also been celebrated. Mr. Duggett, the family solicitor, gave away the bride (in grey). Lawrence Rivers acted as my best man. 'The presents,' as the newspapers say, 'were numerous and costly.' Lawrence (with many apologies)

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gave me a cheque for a sum which I am ashamed to quote. He also presented the bride with a string of pearls, which Mrs. Strood informed me in secret were far too girlish for a matron to wear. My father sent me a travelling-bag mounted in silver, his wife a signet ring with our crest. Sophia had delicately hinted that she would prefer to escape the shower of gifts customary at prosperous weddings, but she graciously waived this claim in favour of Rivers's pearls. It might, she said modestly, become an heirloom in the family. So far it has not.

Diana Leighton writing from Rome sent me a small bronze statue of Minerva copied from the antique. 'Wisdom,' she said, with a sort of melancholy playfulness, 'was the principal thing.' So, as a striver after those austere gifts, she gave me the effigy of a goddess more shunned than adored.

Lawrence Rivers never mentioned Diana's name. The influence which she once had wielded over him had ceased to be visible. The world was wondering why his engagement with Miss Darley was not announced. 'What does it mean?' asked my stepmother. 'Miss Leigh's a perfect fool! Why doesn't she bring him to the point?'

In spite of her respect for Rivers Sophia had similar views. What she described as his 'weakness for Mrs. Leighton' had now apparently died out. He owed it to society to choose a wife. He seemed to have selected Charis Darley for the honour. What was the reason for this delay?

'He holds his own ideas about marriage,' said I.

'Man ends in adopting those of the woman he selects for his mate,' replied my wife; 'and I know what Charis Darley's are.'

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'I hope for her sake they are not free,' said I anxiously.

'No, they are perfectly conventional,' replied my wife.

We were at this time silently studying each other's character. Already I was compelled to make allowances for certain impressions left on her understanding by the late professor, who, like myself, had been a man of frail health but robust ideas. Naturally a woman of healthy habit and cheerful temperament she had nevertheless caught from him a taint of pessimism. Although this merely superficial attitude of mind did not affect our own domestic harmony it nevertheless coloured her views on other people's conjugal happiness. Thus, if she did not actually put it into words, Sophia made me feel that she considered my father guilty of a startling error of judgment when he married again. She also held the opinion that whether Rivers married Miss Darley or not was unimportant since in neither case could they expect happiness. Indeed, had I been tempted to cavil, I might have reduced her arguments on the subject of the relations of the sexes to this ill-shaped syllogism: 'No man who marries any other woman but Sophia Strood can hope to be happy. John Strood, therefore, should be the happiest man in the world.'

Fortunately it is possible for a couple of adequate intelligence to recognise each other's trifling aberrations in reasoning with a depreciation which stops short of defining them. Nor is it always incumbent on the wise to express their opinion. Much of my domestic happiness I attribute to philosophic reticence. The man who tells his wife that she is a

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fool (however conclusive the proof with which her conduct may have provided him) has no claims to boast of his common-sense. When Miss Darley described me in a letter already quoted as neither 'fussy nor importunate,' she recognised in me this virtue of adaptive tolerance.

I am here merely suggesting reasons why Sophia and I were apparently happy (I say 'apparently' advisedly and because no human dreams are realised), and why, although I had succeeded to affections which another and clumsier hand had disarranged, my wife and I presented to the world a solid front of apparent content.

Meanwhile the new work of the League was in progress. Ladies' branches were opened in various parts of the country the members of which undertook to teach their children the duties of the Higher Citizenship as the first elements in the education of the young. On this part of our work it is unnecessary for me to dwell since the Reverend Henry Kemp, in his admirable work *Claims of the State on its Citizens*, has left me little to say. It is my province to deal with my friend's public acts only so far as they were influenced by his private life.

A few months after my marriage I was surprised to receive at my club a letter from Diana Leighton written from an hotel at Folkestone. It was brief and to the point. 'Dear Mr. Strood,' she said, 'I have come here only for the purpose of consulting you. I have the strongest reasons for desiring that no one should know it. I appeal to you, as an old friend, to help me, to tell me the truth, and to let no one know that I have been in England.—DIANA LEIGHTON.

'*P.S.* Come to-morrow if you can.'

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Evidently the gossip drifting over to Rome had agitated this unhappy lady. Just as two years ago malicious people had driven her from Rivers's side by constantly asking, 'Why cannot the woman leave the man alone?' similar voices were now repeating, 'Why doesn't Rivers marry Miss Darley and have done with it?' In both cases, for a time at least, the ladies had pretended not to hear. Whether Miss Darley held some promise from Rivers I am unable to say, but that he had ceased to correspond with Mrs. Leighton I was well aware. The situation which had thus arisen was a painful one, especially for those like myself behind the scenes. I had the strongest reason a man can have for being interested in Miss Darley's welfare; to Mrs. Leighton I was bound by ties of friendship; whilst Lawrence was my benefactor, my employer, and, to a marked extent, my leader.

Now secrecy is generally dangerous, especially when a man is married. It was not easy for me to go down to Folkestone without exciting, I will not say the suspicions for that is a word which, in his relations with his wife, should find a place in no honest husband's vocabulary, but the natural curiosity of the lady who justly claimed my confidence.

There was, however, no time to lose, so I telegraphed to Mrs. Leighton bidding her expect me on the next day and, following the vulgar instinct which, in moments of haste, compels the most discreet of us to cover the interests of our friends under a subterfuge, I told Sophia that I had arranged to 'have a round' at the Central Surrey Golf Club with a friend invented for the occasion and named MacAllister.

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'Why, I never knew you could play,' said Sophia.

'No,' said I, 'but I 'm thinking of beginning. Dr. Black (Black was a member of my club) strongly advises it, and a day in the country will do me good.' This she knew was true.

The next morning (it was in November) dawned wet and squally but true to my promise and, in spite of the well-meant protests of my wife, I started on the journey.

Looking back on this act of unselfish dishonesty I recall Sir Walter Scott's famous lines learned years ago in the nursery. However innocent the web of deceit we weave the frail fabric must always be dark with the ominous threads from which lies are spun.

'A true sportsman,' I answered jauntily, 'laughs at the weather. Besides I dare say it will clear up. In any case MacAllister expects me.'

The accursed MacAllister! When I embark on a policy it is my misfortune to carry it out too completely. This is one of the tricks of a strong and vivid imagination.

'Good-bye, my dear,' I said gaily; 'I shall be back to dinner.'

'Very good!' replied Sophia watchfully.

With that, jumping into the cab which the servant had called, and bearing in a heavy leathern bag the various implements of the game recently acquired, I told the man to drive to Victoria Station whilst my wife watched me from the window.

Now Sophia is an exceedingly shrewd and observant woman, trained in this respect by her late husband, whom (as she frequently informed me) she aided in his researches.

On slight indications the most unjust suspicions

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too often are founded. A cabman leaving Cumberland Square for Victoria station turns to the right; if, however, his destination is Waterloo, his obvious course is to the left. In this instance we turned in the direction which Sophia did not expect. For I had told her that the imaginary golfer's train left Waterloo at the same hour that I had arranged to leave the L. C. and D. station at Victoria for Folkestone. A brief study of the A B C made it clear that there was no train from Waterloo at the hour I had mentioned, whilst a further intelligent search discovered the Folkestone express.

Provided with such compromising data as this, Sophia naturally began to consider whether I was not (from an unworthy purpose of my own) bent on deceiving her.

I did not, however, discover the steps which she took to dispel her doubts (or rather, I should say, inadvertently to increase them), till I returned home.

Meanwhile whilst I was journeying tranquilly to Folkestone through the tearing wind and the driving rain, smoking comfortably and wondering what Diana Leighton was bent on learning from me, Sophia was trying with the skill of a detective to solve the problem which I had set her.

'John,' I can imagine her saying to herself, 'John must be taught to conceal nothing from me.'

But absorbed in my own or rather in Diana's affairs, I thought little of the annoyances which a not ungenerous solicitude for the interests of a friend and a reckless disregard of my own domestic peace were preparing for me.

I found Folkestone lashed by the fury of a south-

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west gale. Dark masses of cloud were tearing across the sky; the Boulogne boat was reported to be two hours late; much damage had been done to the harbour-works at Dover. As I drove to the hotel I had a glimpse of a wild sea and the stricken shipping staggering against the savage skyline, but my time was too short to watch the roaring equinox struggling with the heaped-up billows of the Channel.

Mrs. Leighton was waiting for me in a private room. The fire was blazing on the hearth, engravings of the 'Monarch of the Glen,' 'A Member of the Royal Humane Society' afforded evidence of the popular admiration for the works of Landseer which to me are teeming with melancholy memories inasmuch as they adorned the walls of the Bayswater dentist to whom in my schooldays my aching teeth were first submitted.

Diana Leighton certainly looked older and sadder and, I believe, guessed that I was conscious of the change, for she told me she had had an attack of influenza at Rome but was stronger than ever. Her daughter, she added, now 'grown a great girl,' was at school at St. Cloud. Having thus cleared the ground she began to circle round the subject on which she desired to consult me but, because I was no longer afraid of her I brought her abruptly to the point.

'I think I can guess what you want me to advise you about; so please treat me as though I were your lawyer or doctor. The only way we can save ourselves, Mrs. Leighton, is by facing the truth. However sharp its sting in the present the future will be made easier by submitting to the pang.'

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She gave me a glance which did not quite conceal the irritability which possibly my manner aroused.

'In the affairs of our friends,' she said, 'all of us set the highest value on truth, Mr. Strood.'

'Yes. I know how we're tempted to dodge it,' I answered, remembering with some compunction my own subterfuges; 'still it 's the only possible life-policy. Remember there 's nothing I wouldn't do to put things on a practical basis for you only you must trust me. Since we last met, Mrs. Leighton, the experience of both of us has increased.'

'You,' she said, 'have married. What has it taught you?'

'To wrestle with reality like a man! Do you know, Mrs. Leighton, I have never had the courage to let you and Lawrence see it. I was afraid of losing your friendship, so I helped you both hide it.'

'Then you guessed I wanted to talk to you about Lawrence,' she said.

'I 'm sure,' said I. 'You have heard the gossip about Miss Darley. You want to know, as you have every right, what it means. I will make a confession—a humiliating confession—to show you how completely you may trust a comrade in the same sad company. I will give you hostages. You shall give me hostages in return. We will exchange, as it were, drops of our own heart's blood.'

As I spoke she watched me at first with wonder, then with anger, but finally with quickening interest, as she recognised in my words a gallant effort to melt the ice which separates the confidences of the sexes.

I told her of my meeting with Charis Darley, of my feeling for her, and of her rejection of me.

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'I am loth,' I said, 'to speak ill of any woman but as I look back on what occurred, free from her fascinations and the faithful husband of an honourable and trusting wife, I am compelled to admit that Miss Darley used me as a stalking-horse to bring Lawrence Rivers within shot.'

'Do you mean Miss Darley is in love with him?' she asked.

'She has been in love with him for more than a year. That is her only excuse. She is a strange and charming creature but just withal. I suspect her handiwork in bringing me and my dear wife together. Her instincts must have told her how well we were suited; her sense of fairness that she owed me lasting compensation for the sorrow she caused me.'

'Miss Darley seems as generous in rewarding you as she is ingenious in charming Lawrence,' replied Diana Leighton rigidly, and as she spoke the dignity of her departing beauty changed for a look of jealousy and dislike.

But remembering that I was ministering to a lovesick mind and that a strong tonic was needed to give it tone, I replied impressively, 'That speech is unworthy of the Diana Leighton who left England for the sake of the man in whom she believed.'

My words had their effect.

'I'm a fool,' she said, half to herself, 'and an old fool too. The prizes are for the young and free. And after all does it matter whether it is this modern huntress or another? I crossed that awful channel yesterday, Mr. Strood, to ask you whether she will catch her prey?'

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less of love than you do. How many of us, do you think, are compelled to live without it?'

This appeal, I think, called her to herself.

She made some sort of effort to drape her unrobed dignity.

'I knew,' I said, with a relapse into a less tragic manner, 'what was going on and dreaded the result. Now the inevitable has happened.'

'What am I to do?' she asked.

'Write to Lawrence and set him free!'

'I'll think over it,' she said.

Then she thanked me for coming and, having swallowed a hurried luncheon I drove back to the station.

But luck was against me. The wind had blown a great elm-tree across the road. The delay caused by this obstruction made me miss the train.

But for this accident my meeting Mrs. Leighton would never have been known. Possibly some may see a moral lesson in the fact that it was discovered.

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CHAPTER XXIV

IT was nine o'clock when I rang the bell of our house and wondered what excuse I should make. The illusive image of the brawny MacAllister rose before me. Why had he made me late?

Coming up from Folkestone an unselfish detachment from my own affairs had prevented me from thinking of myself. The world, I told myself, was full of disharmonies, chiefly the result (men of science taught us) of our unintelligent evolution through the ages from the ancestral type. Organs of use to him, becoming rudimentary with us, had grown a danger. Just as nature had implanted in us organs entailing unnecessary physical risk, similarly, with our quickening intelligence, we had acquired fatal moral weaknesses. For example the predominance of passion over reason of which Diana Leighton was the victim, was due to the fiery power of illusion gathered by man in his progress towards the light. But whilst surgery may save us from the dangers of an unnecessary appendix, no wisdom can protect us against the frailties of the heart or the aberrations of the vanity which is rooted there. What could I do for Mrs. Leighton except urge on her the obvious but comfortless remedy of resignation? For this poor result surely fifteen shillings and sixpence for a return ticket represented an

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With this, and as much calm as I could muster, I strode into the dining-room. But the cloth was not laid; the fire was out; the hearth cold! Exasperated by this neglect of my comforts I exclaimed, 'This is a pretty welcome home!'

'I scarcely expected to see you again,' she replied, still immovable as granite, 'especially after my interview with Mr. Rivers.'

'Good heavens!' I cried, 'you haven't been to see him?'

'I saw him at three o'clock at Miss Darley's. I asked him if he could explain your conduct. He said he had no idea. He accompanied me to the office where your clerk repeated your ridiculous story of golf and MacAllister!'

'Well?' said I desperately. 'Well? Don't spare me!'

'I showed them,' she continued, 'the telegram from the club secretary denying the existence of MacAllister and all knowledge of you. They were as astounded as I was.'

'Then you've done it!' I exclaimed. 'There never was a more striking example than this of the danger of mistrusting an honourable and scrupulous husband. You've rendered an explanation necessary which will play the deuce.'

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'Mean?' I repeated. 'I mean that it's tragic. You're bent on carrying fire and sword through a region you have no right to enter, a region over which duty placed me as sentinel!'

'You're talking like a lunatic!' she exclaimed. 'You haven't—surely you haven't——'

'No, no!' I cried, 'I haven't been drinking. It's

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you, you rash woman, who have been preparing a bitter cup for your friends!'

But even this appeal could not shake her resolution but I felt, even as she defied me, my admiration for her strength of character increasing, in spite of the extreme inconvenience to which it was exposing me.

'Oblige me by laying aside those theatrical airs, John!' she commanded. 'If there is any real excuse for your abominable slyness I will overlook it if I can. If, after due consideration, I find your offence too grave, I need scarcely point out to you that it will be no longer possible for me to live under the same roof with you!'

For the moment what was softest and best in my nature quailed before this icy blast. I seemed to see the pleasant domestic structure built up so carefully crumbling in the dust of a foolish jealousy. A moment later, however, all the philosopher rose within me and I perceived that although my wife might be unjustly wroth with me that her affection was the fire at which it was kindled.

The sense of suffering under an injustice left me, and I said, 'Sophia, since you insist, as I admit is your right, on knowing everything I must first consult Lawrence Rivers. It is his secret, not mine, although he has at present no idea of it. To keep my faith with you untarnished I must break a promise given to another.'

'To another woman?' she asked icily.

'Yes, to another woman—a woman whom at all risks I am endeavouring to protect against her own folly.'

'I'm sick of mysteries,' returned Sophia, 'and if

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this business isn't cleared up at once I'll know the reason why! Am I a girl to be put off with this rubbish, I should like to know?'

'No, you are not a girl, Sophia,' I said, 'and it shall be cleared up to-night. I'll see Rivers at once!'

'You'll find him at Chelsea as usual!' replied my wife meaningly.

'I'll go immediately,' I said resolutely.

Then, after eating a biscuit and swallowing a small dose of whisky and seltzer-water, I set out on my dismal errand.

The rain was falling, the wet street reflecting the glowing lamps and the south-west wind howling over the chimney-pots and through the boughs of the trees in Kensington Gardens as I drove westward in a damp hansom. There was a time, I remembered, when I had stood with my back to the fire in the pink and white drawing-room and given my views on many things—on politics and art, on literature and human conduct—to Miss Darley and her attentive aunt. Now I imagined another and a greater mind filling my place. How strange are the vicissitudes of life! Here I was invading that pleasant spot as a peace-dispeller, not because my soul delighted in mischief as some have pretended but because I was compelled to find a remedy to restore the tranquillity of a loving though jealous wife!

Such thoughts as these pursued me as we descended the steep street leading from the Bayswater Road to Kensington. The climbing 'buses splashed the mud in adhesive flakes across the slippery way; a misty moon through the flying scud revealed black boughs waving hysterically to the wild sky. I

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thought of sea-tossed wanderers, of the pain and weariness of life, of the struggle to retain happiness, of the despair with which we see it vanish. Even then my thoughts were only indirectly personal. My first duty was to my wife. When it became a question of sparing her or of shielding Diana Leighton's dignity against dangers created by her own rashness, reason allowed no hesitation in my choice.

The whistling gale seemed in harmony with the turmoil within. The winds of doubt swept through my mind, but they came from the cave where Lawrence Rivers ruled their wrath. It was for him to quell the storm!

But we were at Chelsea. The cab stopped before the door. A random moonbeam gleamed on the rolling tide for a moment, then a cloud swallowed it up and a stinging squall rushed through the darkness.

All the witches of Battersea seemed riding across the river on the whistling blast.

The door opened. The servant knew me, I fear too well. I told her that I must see Mr. Rivers and would wait in the dining-room.

The cloth was still on the table with the evidences of three diners. In the drawing-room above Miss Darley was playing Chopin as she had often played to me.

The music ceased, then the servant returned. Would I please come upstairs?

Reluctantly I obeyed.

Lawrence was standing on the rug by the fire, a place with which a vanished hospitality had once honoured me. Miss Darley had just risen from the piano. I entered the room conscious that they were expecting me with curiosity. Miss Leigh, coming

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forward to meet me, explained (as it were officially, her satisfaction in seeing me. Rivers said, 'We were afraid you had been kidnapped on some phantom golf-course!'

Then Miss Darley and he laughed, whilst Miss Leigh remarked, 'You made Mrs. Strood quite anxious!'

'A ridiculous misunderstanding, of course!' said I, conscious by their manners that they had all been witnesses of an absurd scene.

'What does it mean, you troubler of domestic peace?' asked Rivers, still smiling carelessly.

But his amusement nettled me. Even the most amiable of us accept with resentment the part of the comic husband—the Don Juan of the cheap farce who has amused the vulgar since the days of Molière. So I met this uncalled for mirth with gravity, and replied, 'If you can give me five minutes' conversation in private, Lawrence, I will try to explain.'

Then turning to Miss Leigh, I apologised for spoiling her evening with 'this *painful* business!' launching the phrase to suggest a pitch of feeling beyond the key of the jocular.

'May we have it out in the dining-room, Miss Leigh?' asked Rivers, curious but untroubled.

We went to the dining-room. I closed the door, and he began still, in a tone of banter: 'Well, John! and what other story have you invented which needs my support?'

'None,' I answered. 'I 'm only waiting for your sanction to tell my wife the truth. Read that!'

I gave him Diana Leighton's letter and saw his face change.

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'I have just returned from Folkestone,' I went on. 'Unluckily my ill-advised efforts missed their object and greatly disturbed my wife.'

'She'll get over it,' he said impatiently. 'What did you tell Diana?'

Then I closed with him.

'She asked me whether you were in love with Miss Darley. I said I didn't know. Some gossip coupling your names, it seems, had reached her in Rome. Then she asked me whether Miss Darley was in love with you, and I replied that I believed she was.'

I stopped and watched the trouble in his face.

'Forgive me,' I said relentingly; 'but it's absurd to pretend a situation doesn't exist when it's visible from Rome!'

'What else?' he asked, after a painful silence.

'Something I would prefer not to repeat,' I replied.

'But I must hear!' he said imperatively.

'She said the prizes were for the young, and supposed that Miss Darley would succeed in hunting you down! We must make allowance for a disappointed woman, Lawrence!'

Here I looked at him to see whether I had said too much, but his face was eager with a consuming curiosity, so I went on a little nervously, with a propitiatory ring in my voice.

'But you can guess what I told her! I put the case as I saw it. Beckstone, I said, must have an heir. Accident or inclination brought you constantly into each other's society. Miss Darley was beautiful, accomplished, and admired; people were talking. Then she said, "Why doesn't he marry her?" and I said, "You know best, Mrs. Leighton."'

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'Why did you say that?'

We had reached the critical point.

'Because I suspected you promised her in your Oxford days never to marry any one else. If there was such a promise I begged her to free you from it.'

'Will she?' he asked, with startling eagerness.

'I urged her to with every argument I could find, Lawrence, but I hated the business, and every word I said seemed to sting her to the quick. It was tragic to see her, worn and sad, clinging as I told her to an impossible hope. Still, I think she'll end in writing to set you free.'

'But you surely told her,' said he, 'that a boy's promise wasn't binding in a man?'

'No,' said I, 'I didn't. If you gave her the promise she knows you'll keep it. At the same time, if you asked her for freedom her pride would never deny it. She is a big-hearted woman, Lawrence, but you expect her to anticipate what you want.'

'Good heavens, man, I don't know myself!' he answered. 'I can't write, because I'm ashamed! There's memory behind and a thousand claims. I can only wait for her to——'

'Accept the inevitable?' I suggested, as he hesitated.

'Yes, if you like to put it so,' he replied.

But I who had thought his will firmer and his soul higher was now shocked. But though I knew that the glamour of sex undermines manhood and benumbs self-respect, I had never respected him less.

'Does Miss Darley know?' I asked.

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'That concerns only Miss Darley and myself!'

'Well, I did my best,' I said coldly. 'It isn't my place to advise.'

He stood in silence, looking on the opposite wall at the fine water-colour drawing of a gleaming stretch of sand and the foaming unrest of the broken waves beyond—a picture which had often refreshed my own dusty fancies in happy days.

'Come and say good-bye to them,' he said, suddenly turning to me.

Respecting his natural desire to be rid of me I led the way upstairs.

'What may I tell my wife?' I asked, with my hand on the door.

'What you like,' he answered indifferently.

Then I went in. Miss Darley, in a charming gown of white and gold (a favourite of Lawrence, I felt, as one feels such things), sat in a low chair before the fire, the picture, it seemed to me, of triumphant youth and beauty bent on conquering.

What did she know? What did she not know? Why was she so sure that the man was in her power? She had stalked her poet through me, he had been brought to bay in the same pink and white room where, but a few months ago, my own hopes had been shattered.

Though a man may be the faithful husband of one woman, yet shall he not forget!

'Regrets,' you will say. No, not regrets, rather dreams (perhaps happily) unrealised.

'My cab is waiting, Miss Leigh,' I said, 'so I'll wish you good-night.'

'We know what a busy man you are, Mr. Strood,' she answered, giving me her long white fingers to

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shake, whilst I wondered how far she was in their secret.

Then turning to Miss Darley, I begged her to forgive me for spoiling the music. Rivers, I said, would make the excuses which I feared my intrusion needed! He bent his worried eyes on me full of suppressed irritability, and said wearily, 'All right, Strood! your reputation 's safe with me.'

Then I was conscious that Miss Darley glanced at him appealingly, and that the look soothed him more than it should, and suspected that if he was waiting for Mrs. Leighton to act it was because Miss Darley directed his policy.

With every desire to keep warm my first enthusiasms, I must here admit that henceforward Rivers was never for me the idol he once had been. Perhaps I had expected him to move on a grander plane than is permitted by the selfishness which love engenders. But if the temperature of my feelings had been lowered, it was not because he had displaced me in a heart wherein I had wished to creep, but because, under a double influence, neither of which he completely obeyed, I had seen his pride brought low.

Love is a foolish monster to follow—especially for a leader of men!

When I arrived home my wife was waiting for me in my study. Having inadvertently distressed her I felt that I must now restore her peace at whatever personal sacrifice.

'Well?' she began, reseating herself in her late husband's armchair, recently covered with red morocco for my use. 'Well?'

I felt the challenge in the monosyllable as I replied, 'Rivers says I may tell you what I like.'

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'Does that include the truth?' she asked, with a readiness for conflict which only completest submission could mollify.

I began in the most generous spirit.

'I was compelled to deceive you to-day, Sophia,' I said, 'and trust my duty to others may never oblige me to do so again. Now if you will give me your attention I will make you acquainted with the principal facts.'

Then I told her of Rivers's infatuation for Mrs. Leighton, and its consequences; of the promise I suspected him of giving her, and of his apparent, but to me unintelligible, understanding with Miss Darley. The only fact known to me which I concealed was my own unfortunate attachment for Miss Darley and the uses to which she had put it for the furtherance of her schemes. And as I told my story it was a pleasure to see the change on my wife's face. Her look of severity vanished, an expression of indulgent, I might almost say of patronising affection took its place.

'My dear John,' she said, 'what you have told me makes what I have always suspected clear. You must never keep any secret from me again. Always consult me. I might have saved you from many mistakes. None of these people have ever taken you into their confidence. They have used you as a veil for their vices. Mrs. Leighton I should be tempted to describe as a bold bad woman very fond of the men. Even you seem to have been taken in by her now fortunately waning powers of attraction. For Mr. Rivers I feel the deepest sympathy. He is cast in a very noble mould, but as no man is perfect, his character is assailable on the usual side. Any

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woman with a sufficiency of good looks might make a fool of him. No man of genius ought to marry. He presents what my late husband would have described as 'a paradoxical problem of very deep interest.' You have no doubt already remarked how at least two-thirds of the women imagine themselves more or less in love with him. It is our duty —yours and mine—to save him.'

'How?' I asked, astounded by her speedy but inaccurate conclusions.

'By helping Miss Darley play her game!' she replied.

'But after what I 've told you, Sophia,' I protested, 'do you think she 's worthy of him?'

'At first sight it certainly seems not,' she replied, 'but on second thoughts I think you will admit that she is quite as worthy as any woman Mr. Rivers is likely to meet!'

'But he meets everybody!' I protested.

'But sees only with a man's eyes which miss woman's noblest moral qualifications! I don't mind telling you now, John, since, for the first time, we are making a clean breast to each other, that my late husband told me that it was those qualities and not my beauty which drew him to me.'

A pause followed, to me full of invisible discomfort, but to Sophia, unless her expression deceived me, teeming with contemplative satisfaction.

'But why,' I asked at last, 'did you once think Miss Darley wasn't good enough for Rivers and then change your mind?'

'I will tell you,' she replied, 'if you think your vanity will bear a strain.'

'Thank heaven I 'm free from that!' I replied.

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Sophia smiled indulgently.

'I think your wife's the best judge of that, John, she said; 'however, I will tell you. Perhaps you never suspected that Charis Darley was once attracted by you!'

My feet turned cold and my head hot, but I answered cautiously. At one time it had occurred to me that she had rather liked me, but as I had other things to think of I had paid no attention to it!

'That was fortunate,' replied my wife. 'All the same the silly girl spared no pains to capture you.'

'I never noticed it,' I repeated carelessly.

'Others did,' she went on complacently. 'Did she not constantly make you take her to theatres and concerts? Wasn't she always at your father's house? What did that mean?'

Here I saw the craft of my stepmother. But if it flattered my wife to cherish the illusion suggested by a cunning brain why should not I accept this useful protection of my own dignity?

I replied modestly that there were things best for men not to see.

'I 'm glad you think so, you dear old silly,' replied my wife, now in the best of tempers.

'I dare say I 'm dull,' I replied, to lead her on, 'but all the same I must say Miss Darley's conduct isn't very clear to me now.'

'How can it be, John. You will never understand women of that sort! When you 're in doubt consult me. I read them like a book. Finding that you were blind to her fascinations and unlikely to propose, Charis made up her mind to encourage a marriage between us. No doubt (for she 's remarkably quick) she saw that I was the sort of woman

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whom (if I may say so) you would get if you could. "All men have their type," she said to me just before you and I met; "you are Mr. Strood's." Well, you know what happened?'

I nodded and blushed.

'Failing you,' continued my wife impartially, 'Charis had evidently set her mind on Mr. Rivers —you see he's a poet, a brilliant public man, a singularly handsome one, and remarkably wealthy! Can't you see how her mind worked? "If I help them over their marriage," she told herself, "they will help me over mine." She knew in any case that she could count on me! What we must do therefore is perfectly plain. You must get rid of that other good-for-nothing thing with a husband of her own whom she has neglected! Do you understand, John?'

Then from the wilderness of confusion into which my wife's astonishing confidence had plunged me I replied that 'I hoped I did,' and that there was nothing like a woman's mind, subtle, discriminating, and just withal, for smoothing the rough edges of life and promoting happiness.

At this compliment Sophia smiled and said, 'Now, John, I feel that at last you do understand me! We 've talked enough business for to-night. You look thoroughly worn out and I know you 've had no dinner. Cook has prepared a sweetbread for you, and I 've put a pint bottle of burgundy to warm by the dining-room fire.'

I went downstairs. The fire had been relighted, the table laid. Domestic comfort smiled on me again.

Sophia sat by me whilst I ate my supper.

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CHAPTER XXV

A SENSE of duty to one group of worthy people may easily become perilous to another group equally deserving. Sophia, I perceived, was now full of dangerous knowledge wrung from me by a regrettable accident. She constantly met Rivers at the office, where she came to see the treasurer of the women's branch of the League. But although I was aware of a change on her part towards our chief—she became, if I may say so without disrespect to either, more deferentially motherly — fortunately Rivers, accustomed to all forms of foolish adulation, failed to observe it. That she was tempted to give him hints for his guidance I observed with some trepidation.

'If Lawrence ever found out that I told you,' said I, 'I should have to resign the secretaryship.'

To comfort me, she assured me that she understood my interests better than I did myself.

Still it was not easy for a woman of her activity to sit down and wait for things to happen. One day she said, 'John, if Charis Darley guessed that woman had been pestering you, how upset she'd be!'

'But she isn't likely to know,' I answered.

'Mr. Rivers might tell her,' Sophia suggested. 'Besides, you must remember Charis is very shrewd!'

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I pricked up my ears. Had my wife succeeded in warning Miss Darley without committing a breach of faith with me? This suspicion was not quite unconfirmed.

One Sunday when I was at the club Sophia had lunched in Chelsea, where it seems certain vague confidences had been exchanged, for at dinner my wife said, 'Charis has found out all about it!'

I was startled.

'Do you mean she knows Mrs. Leighton saw me?'

'Please don't be so violent, John,' she protested, offended by my vivacity. 'Of course she didn't actually say so, but she gave me to understand that whatever the other woman might do she was safe!'

'Safe to marry Rivers?'

'Don't imagine, John, that women are so immodest in their confidences. Charis would never have the effrontery to admit such a thing, nor I the ill-breeding to encourage such a confession!'

'I imagine nothing,' I replied. 'A wise woman, of course, obeys the dictates of her heart!'

'Now you're trying to be cynical, and it doesn't become you,' said my wife; 'but leave this business to me. When a woman is trying to persuade herself she's in love she always wants another of delicate feeling to sympathise with.'

Some weeks passed. Rivers was still waiting for the letter from Mrs. Leighton which I had half promised.

'Have you heard from Rome yet?' I inquired every other day till he became exasperated; for I regret to say he was growing irritable. 'Please,' he said, 'don't ask that again!'

That he should have shown such patience was of

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itself peculiar and, to my mind, strong evidence of the contradictory elements in the man. It was the cause of endless conjecture on the part of my wife.

'It shows, as my late husband would have said,' observed Sophia, 'the extraordinary want of decision of the male in presence of rival female attraction.'

'Then,' said I, put on my mettle, as it were, by this comparison, 'then it suggests at least one reason for polygamy in less artificial societies than our own!'

'What do you mean, John?' she asked, suspecting, I fear, an implied impropriety.

'Mean! why nothing, my dear, except that a philosophic observer is compelled to hear the voice of man's lower nature clamouring behind the uncertain phenomena of the human will!'

Once Rivers had told Sophia that I was an unconscious humorist. Remembering this now, she desired to reprove me.

'If you are trying to make game of me, John, I would prefer you did so in simpler language,' she said, with some annoyance.

'I wasn't trying to be funny,' I replied. 'I am a man of serious views, as serious as the late Mr. Tracy Hill, although I arrive at them from observation of the world and not from research.'

'I fail to see the necessity of comparison with my late husband,' said Sophia, with repellant dignity.

'My dear Sophia, it's the last thing in the world I should think of. I merely meant to suggest that if he were alive—I mean, if we had known one another—that we should have discovered many views in common. You've observed the same thing yourself!'

'We were discussing Charis Darley's affairs,'

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observed my wife coldly, 'and not, as I imagine, criticising my late married life.'

'I know that,' said I, 'and I only ventured to point out that there are some very obscure points in her affairs!'

'Will you put your finger on one, John, for my information?'

'Well, it seems to me, Sophia, that Rivers must get some satisfaction out of the business which we can't see or else he wouldn't let it go on!'

But who can be sure of not wounding a virtuous woman's delicacy! To my surprise Sophia coloured to the spot where her firm white brows met her well-smoothed hair.

'How dare you suggest such a thing to me!' she cried, 'even though the unhappy woman's conduct suggest it.'

'Miss Darley's conduct suggests nothing of the kind to me, Sophia,' I answered indignantly.

'How like a man to say awful things of a woman he's made a fool of and then to pretend he never meant it! I wish when you are talking to me, John, you would remember I'm not one of your club friends and accustomed to the view of female morality which, I understand, prevails among men.'

I was about to rejoin with some acrimony to this undeserved, although I doubt not well-meant attack, when the servant, entering the room, gave me a telegram which filled me with amazement. It was from my father, and said:

'Leighton died this morning.'

'Good heavens!' I exclaimed, handing it to Sophia. 'What will happen now?'

'Good heavens!' she repeated.

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Thus, in the midst of an argument of some heat, were we reminded of the swift vicissitudes of life and the folly of domestic contention.

'A fit, I should think,' observed Sophia thoughtfully. 'He looked dreadfully puffy. Go to Mr. Rivers at once.'

I took a hansom and drove to Rivers's chambers off Piccadilly. His man opened the door. Mr. Rivers, he said, was very busy.

'Never mind,' said I.. I crossed the square hall, mounted three steps and entered the study—a delightful room with circular windows and as much light as London gives. He was at his writing-table absorbed in his work.

'Be quiet for a minute, please,' he said, as I waved the telegram at him.

'I've come——' I said.

'Quiet, please; never mind why you've come, let me finish!' he exclaimed, without looking up.

So I sat down and watched him. He muttered to himself, glanced at a passage in the Greek play before him, wrote a line or two, then looked at me and said:

'There! I'll leave it at that and try it on you.'

'I've come——' I began again.

'You can tell me after I've read it so be quiet and listen.'

Then he read that charming poem, 'The Lady and the Philosopher,' one of those autobiographical impressions by which the secret weaknesses of poets are sometimes revealed to those able to read between the lines.

He read beautifully, and although, under the pressure of a stern reality which he, not I, must face,

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I was in no mood for poetry, for the moment I almost forgot the news I brought.

'This is the idea,' he said by way of explanation. 'The youth, by profession a philosopher, begs a boon of the gods. Owing to the intercession of Prometheus (it was before the theft of fire from heaven) this is granted. As a result of divine indulgence, therefore, the lovers are enabled to make an exchange of souls. The poem opens when the ordeal is over and they meet after their bewildering dream. Each has learned too much. Passion remains but the magic has gone.'

Then he read it. The poem is in his *Lays and Lyrics*, and need not be quoted here.

'Well,' he asked, as he finished, 'what do you think of it?'

'Beautiful! exquisite! fanciful! delightful!'

'Thank you for the adjectives. But what of the human philosophy?'

'It seems to me,' said I, 'that but for the common-sense of Prometheus the lovers would never have been able to look each other in the face again. After their discovery mutual respect was impossible.'

'You see the moral of it then?'

'Plainly,' I answered. 'Love in its higher degrees is only possible when the imagination, fed on ignorance, illuminates what complete knowledge would blast. We must make the best of love as the gods have given it, encourage an illusion instead of reducing it to the baser elements discovered by your lovers after their Promethean experiment.'

'That's pretty nearly what I mean,' he said, more gratified by the success of his own poem as tested on me than pleased with the keenness of my per-

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ceptions, 'so I'll reward you by dedicating the poem to you.'

Readers of *Lays and Lyrics* will no doubt remember that 'The Philosopher and the Lady' is inscribed to 'J. S.,' initials often mistaken by the inquisitive for Juliett Santerro, a famous stage beauty whom Rivers never met.

But instead of thanking him for thus honouring me, I blurted out my message.

'Rivers,' I said, 'Bill Leighton's dead!'

'What!' he cried.

I gave him the telegram. He read it in silence.

'Diana must come home at once,' he said, 'and I must——'

He left the sentence unfinished, glanced at his writing-table littered with his manuscripts. My message had scattered one of those creative moods which were probably the happiest Rivers ever knew.

From the web of his entanglements with two women, the poet had just woven a fabric of extreme beauty. But now he would be called upon to act. To be an admirable artist is one thing, to be a man of the most unselfish character is another. To my mind there was no longer any doubt which lady had now the stronger claim. Leighton's death had made that plain. But how would he meet this crisis in three lives?

I hoped he would ask me to advise him, but he asked me nothing.

We left his rooms together.

'You are going to Chelsea?' I said reproachfully.

'Yes,' he answered, 'to Chelsea!'

He jumped into a hansom and drove away.

I went to Arthur Place to consult my father.

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CHAPTER XXVI

FOR several days I saw nothing of Rivers. Although we were in need of his advice, and our council of a divided mind on a matter of immediate policy, he did not appear at the office of the League. He was to take the chair at the meeting summoned next month to hear the most eminent soldier of the day address us on the subject of 'Military Service and Civic Duty.' The distinguished lecturer's views were well known, but did not meet with the approval of the radical section of the League. The question, therefore, had arisen how far the chairman was justified in supporting the doctrine that military instruction must be made a first essential in the national education. Ought the League, on so burning a question, to adopt any attitude but one of complete neutrality? Dr. Hendon Barker and his friends, who 'dreaded the intrusion of the dangerous spirit of militarism into the scheme of our national life,' insisted that the League, however ready to discuss such opinions academically, had no right to countenance them as a policy. The meeting had been advertised, and was now expected with considerable public interest. The debate grew warm among our members. Both sides wished to know what Rivers intended to say, but desired that he should say different things. In this country the spirit of party is with difficulty

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kept out. We looked at all questions through the lenses of our familiar spectacles. The League, therefore, for the second time was threatened with a crisis. If, as spokesman for the association, Rivers decided to support the lecturer, Dr. Barker and his friends threatened to resign in a body. The matter might easily have been settled had Rivers been with us, but without saying a word to me he had left London.

'Where is Mr. Rivers?' demanded Dr. Hendon Barker of me in a voice which, in moments of repressed exasperation, I regret to say employers are sometimes tempted to use to secretaries and clerks.

I had no idea, and told him so.

'Then don't you think, Mr. Strood, that you had better ascertain?' continued the Reverend Doctor with sternly lifted brows. 'The meeting is next week and there's no time to be lost. If it were a question of a less unmethodic public man than our president I should be tempted to suspect him of meditating something like a *coup*!'

'With what object?' I inquired.

'To split the League and acquire complete control of his own half,' replied the Doctor promptly.

'Never!' I replied, with dramatic brevity.

Called to order by my monosyllabic defiance, Dr. Barker reflected for a moment. It may have occurred to him that his words had revealed too much of what his own mind desired to conceal.

'Of course,' he continued, 'what I have said to you has been said in the strictest confidence—I mean, Mr. Strood, with regard to the mischievous impression left on us by his absence at such a moment. With regard to the general policy of the

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League, however, you are the only means available at the moment for making our opinions known to him. I look to you, therefore, to see that they reach him in time! Good afternoon!'

Then Dr. Hendon Barker and his soft black felt hat whose meek claims a certain truculence of underjaw harshly contradicted, relieved my room of their disturbing presence.

But where was Lawrence? I called at his rooms and questioned his valet who had packed a portmanteau and called a cab for his master. 'He said, "Expect me when you see me, Roberts." "Very good, sir," said I. Except that he told the cabman to drive to Charing Cross, that's all I know about it. No, he left no message for you, sir.'

Now this was scarcely worthy of Lawrence! He left his secretary to face a difficult position as best he could and without a word of advice. The mystery of the secret departure, indeed, encouraged his enemies to make the worst of it. Dr. Hendon Barker's suspicions that the president intended to spring a surprise on the League, and accept publicly a policy of military reform on which we were of two minds, became less groundless than they had at first seemed. But this explanation of his conduct I felt to be absurd nevertheless. Lawrence had been much too perturbed by the death of William Leighton to harbour such schemes.

That evening I told my wife of my troubles.

'Rivers,' I said, 'has left London. No one knows for where or when he will be back. He has also left me in the lurch to be bullied by that beast Barker!'

I spoke strongly because my feelings had been wounded.

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Sophia was up in arms. She was, if the figure be permitted, always ready to help me with her umbrella.

'I would rather see you resign at once than submit to the impertinences of that person!' she said, with heat.

'Thank you, dear one,' I replied; 'but I've reason to hope that he is still smarting under my reproof. He admitted that I was the only person likely to have influence with Rivers—if we could find him!'

'When he heard of poor Mr. Leighton's death he went to Chelsea,' said my wife thoughtfully. 'So you may be sure that Charis Darley knows!'

This idea had of course been glimmering in my own mind too, but a certain delicacy had prevented me from calling that astute young lady to my assistance.

'But can I ask her?' I inquired.

'If you don't,' said my wife, 'I will.'

At that moment the dining-room door opened, and my stepmother entered the room with an excited rush.

'Mrs. Leighton turned up this afternoon,' she cried. 'Your father has been to Lincoln's Inn, John. William Leighton's affairs are in the hands of his old firm. He has left her everything!'

'Heavens!' I exclaimed; 'then Diana's a rich woman!'

My stepmother nodded and permitted me to fill for her a glass of port.

'It's a pretty kettle of fish!' she said, driven to the vernacular of the servants' hall by the stress of the moment.

'A very pretty kettle indeed!' assented my wife. 'Now we know why Mr. Rivers ran away.

Sophia looked knowing.

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'Why?' asked my stepmother, sipping her port.

'To escape Mrs. Leighton, of course!' replied my wife.

'It's much more likely he has started for Rome to propose to her and missed her on the road,' retorted the other lady contemptuously. 'Everybody knows that he'll have to marry her whether he likes it or not!'

'Why?' asked my wife defiantly.

'To satisfy public opinion and his own conscience!' returned my stepmother with equal firmness. 'It's what they've both been waiting for!'

'Then they've waited too long. The poor man has grown sick of it,' said my wife.

'I forgot Miss Darley was a friend of yours,' said my stepmother. 'So of course you know what she thinks about the nasty business. But I must say if Mr. Rivers doesn't marry Mrs. Leighton he will behave abominably. We all know how she sacrificed everything for him—character, position, everything—in the hope William Leighton would set her free. He has done that in spite of himself now! If she misses her reward it will be one more proof of the awful selfishness of men!'

'Mrs. Leighton is ten years older than Mr. Rivers!' sneered my wife.

'I don't see what difference that makes,' retorted my stepmother, with a meaning look at her adversary which increased my growing uneasiness.

'In some cases it's an advantage,' replied my wife, with admirably repressed rage. 'In the present it ruins your friend's chances.'

'Mrs. Leighton is not my friend!' returned my stepmother. 'My husband would scarcely permit

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me to call upon her. But that does not prevent me from feeling the deepest sympathy for a brilliant and still, I believe, beautiful woman who, unhappily married, was made love to by one of the most fascinating men of his time. There are women who would be proud to be similarly tempted!'

'Thank goodness I'm not in that set!' retorted my wife scornfully. 'I've no patience with people who pretend to sympathise with morbid married women who try to capture famous men ever so much younger than themselves just for the pleasure of seeing themselves *affichées* with them! as the French say.'

'John will tell you how fair you are to his friend. Diana Leighton left London rather than jeopardise the career of the man she loved!'

'Loved!' repeated my wife contemptuously. 'In such a connection the word makes me sick.'

My stepmother looked at me again.

'Do try to make your wife understand, John!' she said with an air of affected weariness.

This appeal not only rendered me exceedingly uncomfortable, but also gave me an unfavourable idea of my stepmother's sincerity. It was I who had shown her the view of Mrs. Leighton's conduct which she now presented to my wife with a moral flourish. Hitherto she had treated it with cynical derision. The woman went to Rome, she insisted, because her chances in London were gone. Still, a quarrel between Mrs. Strood and Mrs. John Strood would have been a domestic calamity. I adopted the boldest course to prevent it, knowing that the shock of surprise may avert the impact of imperious tempers.

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'I have heard the arguments of you both with some surprise,' I answered, in a judicial voice, 'and you have convinced me how impossible it is even for the most accomplished women to understand the heart of a man!'

I had produced my effect.

'Rubbish and nonsense!' exclaimed my wife, who of course had looked to me to side with her.

'What on earth do you mean, John?' added my stepmother.

'What I say,' I replied sturdily. 'My dear,' I went on, turning to Sophia, 'you take it for granted that Rivers will shirk his promise because his feelings have changed. You,' I said, turning to my stepmother, 'believe a generous woman will insist that a rash youth's vow is binding. Well, you are both wrong. In neither case would a man come to such a conclusion.'

'Well, come,' put in Sophia aggressively, 'suppose you tell us what they will do!'

'Although I don't pretend to know what will happen, I can guess how each will act. Each will tell the other the truth and be guided by the decision of the other. Remember they are not mean souls, so there can be no mean climax. The fact that you both should have misjudged them is a striking example of the different methods of men and women in dealing with the problems of the heart!'

'Your stepson should have been trained as a Jesuit,' said Sophia; 'his skill in dealing with facts would be of great service to the order!'

But my diplomacy had had its effect. My stepmother now perceived the folly of exasperating my

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wife. If Sophia insisted on trailing her coat the other lady decided not to tread on the garment. So, withdrawing from an unnecessary conflict, she said:

'It doesn't matter what John thinks but what Mr. Rivers will do!'

'No one knows that, not even Rivers himself,' said I. 'But I'm just going to see if I can find out.'

'John, in fact, is just off to Chelsea to see Miss Darley,' explained my wife to my stepmother.

'Is that—eh—quite discreet?' asked my stepmother, with the purpose, I fear, of annoying us both.

'If I can trust my husband at Chelsea, I see no reason why any one else need be alarmed,' returned Sophia, with rekindling wrath before which the other promptly retreated.

'Of course not, dear! I was only thinking, you know,' replied Mrs. Strood senior suavely.

'I'll go at once,' I interrupted hurriedly. 'Miss Leigh ought to know that Mrs. Leighton's in London. It will help her how to act.'

'Act!' repeated my stepmother; 'the poor creature simply does what her niece makes her!'

'I've no patience with such women!' assented my wife.

This was the first point on which the ladies had agreed.

We rose from the table.

'Put on your fur coat!' said my wife.

I donned her imposing gift whilst she watched me admiringly, moved who shall say by what memories?

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'You might see me into a cab, John,' said my stepmother, watching us with unsmiling face; 'it's a fine night.'

We left the house together and walked to the neighbouring cab-stand.

'Some people who've seen it before wonder how you can wear that coat,' she suddenly observed.

'Too grand for a mere secretary, eh?' I inquired jauntily.

'No. It belonged to the late Professor Hill, that's all.'

'Sophia gave it me on my birthday,' I answered, with suppressed indignation. 'It's perfectly new!'

'The cloth is new, but the fur's the same. Sophia had it done up. I saw it at the furrier's. Of course it would be a pity if it were wasted but you remind me strangely of the late professor in it. I knew him by sight, and have seen him in it. Sophia used to sit beside him on the platform whilst he lectured and make him swallow eggs and brandy when she fancied he was hoarse.'

The subject was profoundly painful. Something which was first cousin to the demon of jealousy stirred within me. My stepmother pursued it in a voice of relentless calm. It was dreadful to think that I had succeeded to the late professor's coat, warm and comforting though it were. But since my wife with delicate tact had concealed the origin of the garment I concealed the shock which either accident or design had inflicted.

'All I know about it is that it's comfortable!' I replied. 'A hansom or a four-wheeler?'

My stepmother pretended to shudder at my callousness. 'No doubt she gave it to both of

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you,' she said. 'You're a most extraordinary man! Quite unlike your father. Thank you, a hansom.'

'Hansom!' I cried masterfully across the dark street.

I handed her in. She drove off. Then hailing a four-wheeler for myself I told the man to drive to Chelsea. As I leaned back in the dark an accusing shadow seemed to sit beside me. Suppose this fur (once the glad covering of a score of happy squirrels) could speak, what tales might it not whisper? Even then it seemed to mutter 'What are you doing in his coat?' Was the ghostly voice of the poor professor under his cold slab of marble in Kensal Green asking for it? I longed to dispose of this inherited garment, but how could I do so without wounding Sophia's feelings? How different are men and women!

If Sophia died and I married again should I give her sealskin to her successor and conceal the fact that another had worn it?

Oppressed by such reflections as these I was quite unable to fix my attention on the business before me till I stood in the familiar hall.

The duty before me was one which might possibly create resentment. Caution was especially necessary. I began by presenting the servant, whom I knew, with half a sovereign. She replied by informing me that Miss Darley was 'next door,' but would return immediately if I would wait.

'Tell her, please, Davis,' I replied, 'that important business brings me and I must see her. I 'll wait in the drawing-room if I may. And, by the bye, Davis,' I continued, 'have you any idea whether Mr. Rivers

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left any message for me when he was here the other night?'

The young woman was comely and intelligent. My gold warmed the palm of her hand. She may even have allowed me other claims for questioning her.

'I don't know, sir,' she replied. 'Miss Leigh was at Brighton; Mr. Rivers stayed late. Miss Darley sent us to bed and let him out herself.'

'How late?' I asked.

'Half-past one,' she replied coolly.

I handed Davis the coat of sinister memories and followed her upstairs. As she opened the drawing-room door for the second time the illusion startled me. Once more, in a fluttering fire-glow, the slender-legged chairs were capering over the rose-pink carpet! The vision, which the switching on of the lamps dispelled, showed how my nerves were stretched.

Do not imagine that the spirit of jealousy was the cause of my troubled mind. Remember I was a man happily married, but the very fact that I was married made me regret the recklessness which flung the bloom of Miss Darley's maidenhood at Lawrence's feet.

'They all,' I told myself bitterly, 'strew flowers before him. Not the lily and the rose but the darker flowers of passion and intrigue.'

I sat for a few moments the victim of biting thoughts, till Miss Leigh, whom I had no desire to see, entered the room. Evidently my message had been delivered to her.

Charis, she said, would be back in a minute. Meanwhile, if she could be of any use, Miss Leigh would be gratified.

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How much did she know? I tried to find out.

'Lawrence Rivers,' I began, 'has left London—no one knows where he has gone or why. His absence has placed me in a position of difficulty. The night before he left he was here. It occurred to me that Miss Darley or yourself might help me. Unless I can telegraph for instructions the interests of the League will suffer.'

'I was staying at Brighton the evening Mr. Rivers called,' replied Miss Leigh. 'If he did tell Charis where he was going she must have her reasons for keeping it from me.'

'What an answer,' I thought.

Should I give this helpless credulous lady a warning?

'I am sorry,' I said, in a disappointed voice, 'that Miss Darley does not confide in you.'

'I really don't see why she should, Mr. Strood,' she replied. 'If I were to insist on it she would refuse to live with me! You will perhaps remember our conversation on this subject in Arthur Place. Since then I have learned that the only way to manage Charis is to let her do as she likes—absolutely! She understands the world better than I do, and constantly tells me so!'

'Then,' said I, baffled by the very weakness of the woman, 'you have no idea of Rivers's present address?'

Miss Leigh shook her head.

'This then,' I reflected, 'is the modern spirit.'

'The world,' I said aloud, 'will soon be ruled by the young woman!'

'You had better tell Charis so,' replied Miss Leigh, a little peevishly, 'for here she comes.'

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I heard voices outside; Davis was delivering my message. Then came the rustle of silks and Miss Darley.

'Mr. Strood has just been telling me that the world is a place ruled by the young woman!' said Miss Leigh spitefully.

'Indeed!' said Miss Darley inattentively. 'Miss Alford is in the dining-room and wants to see you, aunt.'

Her voice said, 'Leave me to deal with this man!'

When we were alone she began promptly. What did I wish to say?

What sense of power was behind her assurance?

Her cool manner suggested 'Don't pretend our interests are the same!'

Remembering another interview in the same room I did not anticipate victory. I was still the rejected lover, she the triumphant subduer of hearts!

Why should not an honourable man admit his weakness? Her gleaming eyes and bare white shoulders, her gallant carriage and the alluring lines of her figure, filled me with the admiration which, repress it as we may, is natural to a man even though hedged in by domestic life. The wife whom I respected had lavished on me all the happiness which a reasonable man expects—but Charis Darley's altars smoked with far headier incense. The fires of reason were not kindled there.

She may have seen on my face some evidence of disturbed feeling, for her frown faded; and when at last she smiled, I pleaded, in spite of myself, 'Why, Miss Darley, do you mistrust me so?'

And as I spoke I grew aware of something which

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the breast of a married man should not hold. Human nature is sometimes a satire on itself. Had the fur-lined coat in the hall below raised the tide of conjugal rebellion encouraged by Miss Darley's beauty?

For the moment I forgot in whose interest I had come.

Meanwhile she had watched me attentively.

'Do I mistrust you?' she asked.

'You doubt my loyalty,' I insisted.

'Is it quite safe to trust a married man,' she murmured, 'after he has forgotten to be grateful?'

Her meaning flashed on me. She meant that she had given me a wife.

'How am I ungrateful?' I asked.

'I must leave you to discover that.'

I guessed her meaning. She had married me to Sophia; in return I was siding with Diana Leighton! Evidently not a thought in Lawrence's brain was hidden from her. To such a pass can a woman's beauty bring the strongest of us!

'You mean,' said I bluntly, 'that I 'm not on your side?'

'Not as I was on yours,' she replied.

'You are showing me what I would rather not see,' said I.

'What am I showing you, Mr. Strood?'

'What vulgar people might call your game,' I answered without flinching.

'I 'm not ashamed of wanting what I want,' she returned coolly.

I longed for power to reprove her, but in conflicts with a woman a man cannot call things by their real names.

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'You've heard of Paris,' I said—'not the city, but Priam's son?'

She laughed as a woman laughs who is winning.

'Am I Helen or the other lady?'

'Ask Rivers!'

Now I shot my one arrow.

'The other lady is in London.'

'Then she has come too late.'

We had entered a circle of feeling wherein I had never stood with her before. Was her position left unguarded because the victory was won?

'May I ask you one more question?'

'I won't promise to answer it.'

'Has Rivers gone to Rome?'

'Yes.'

'Did he start too late?'

'Apparently.'

Then I made up my mind that Diana Leighton must be prepared.

'When will he be back? I want to know because of the League.'

'To-morrow afternoon, I hope.'

'Thank you, Miss Darley.'

We were facing each other on the edge of the white rug. I glanced round me, and added, 'This is a fatal room to others besides myself.'

She looked at me critically.

'I was right,' she said, 'when I told Lawrence that you wanted a sense.'

'Not the sense of forgiveness,' I said sternly, 'for I have forgiven you. Good night, Miss Darley.'

'Good night. Please be careful what you repeat of this interview to your wife.'

Then I stole downstairs. Before I was in the

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hall I heard her fingers rippling over the piano. Was it to cover my retreat or relieve her own feelings?

A girl who could rule Rivers and be the tyrant of her aunt might well be the remorseless critic of his faithful friend.

The great coat filled by phantom memories hung from a peg. Unaided I folded it around me.

In the dining-room I heard voices—the weak Miss Leigh and her friend, no doubt, in foolish converse.

Gently I opened the door and, pursued by the stream of jubilant music, stepped out on to the Embankment.

The night was dark and cold. Once more I heard the splashing of the tide against the stone steps.

'Diana Leighton shall be warned to-morrow,' I reflected. 'After all, victory is to the strong and young and the other has fought for it.'

I stood awhile by the black river, into whose rolling tides men and women have flung themselves ere now for love. How much could I tell at home? Dare I tell my dear wife that she was Miss Darley's gift of compensation? There are truths none can face. How difficult is complete confidence, even between couples happily married! Then my mind, turning to Rivers, wondered what sort of fortune this brilliant and daring schemer was preparing for him.

I trust when I say I felt sure it could not be a happy one that I shall not be misunderstood. For what man, mated to a woman of an iron will, can expect domestic peace?

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Had Charis married me, beautiful and fascinating as I still felt her to be, my lot would have been to follow in the wake of her wishes, conscious all the while of the debasement of my conquered manhood.

Charis Darley was a woman who could command, but who could not obey, except insidiously to gain an end. At last I understood her! She had set out to win Lawrence Rivers, trampling me in the mire of humiliation on the way. Slowly his resistance had been broken down and his kingdom been conquered. To rule it was her next task.

Mine had been a happy escape.

I looked up at the house where the soft warm lights were shining, remembering yet, with a certain hunger of the heart, the profound appeal of her warm youth and beauty. On these weapons men are ever ready to perish. She had turned their edge from my heart against that of my friend. I was wounded; he was slain!

Poor Lawrence! The victim was a noble one.

I hailed a passing hansom. Sophia was asleep when I arrived home. For fear of disturbing her I spent a restless night in the dressing-room. Thank heaven my wife never suspected my thoughts!

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CHAPTER XXVII

THE next morning before I was dressed Sophia desired to know 'what had kept me so late.' I replied that Miss Darley had been out and that I had waited for her return, but I did not think it necessary to explain how a troubled mind had driven me to seek in the frivolous distractions of pool at the club a passing relief of my distress.

'Well, what occurred?' asked my wife.

'Miss Leigh told me she had no idea where Rivers was.'

'It wasn't likely they would tell her, poor thing!' said Sophia.

'Exactly,' said I; 'but all the same I suggested that it was an aunt's duty to find out what her niece was up to.'

'Quite right, John!' answered my wife. 'What did she say to that?'

'She admitted that she was quite under Miss Darley's thumb.'

'How disgusting!' cried Sophia. 'I'd like to be that girl's aunt for a few minutes. But what did you gather?'

'That you were right, my dear.'

Sophia looked triumphant.

'Then your stepmother was wrong?'

'Quite. Rivers went to Rome to break off what-

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ever was on with Mrs. Leighton. Miss Darley made him go.'

'Did that girl have the effrontery to tell you so?'

'She allowed me to guess it—which comes to the same thing.'

'I shall go over to Arthur Place directly after lunch and let your stepmother know how mistaken she was,' replied Sophia.

This aggressive and consequently useless step raised in my mind certain reflections pointing to a policy. As I followed my wife down to breakfast, her square and somewhat broad shoulders, clad in a simple white shirt surmounted by a man's double collar, loomed on me as the embodiment of the indomitable energy within. As I studied her vigorous proportions I realised the contrast of our natures. I was a man of thought, she a woman of action. It was hers to drive, mine to guide. Between two such forces (because one is blind) concerted action is impracticable. With such a temperament as Sophia's, restless, daring, but withal admirable, complete confidence becomes dangerous to the interests of both.

Boundless energy, however, may be impelled in useful directions by wise suggestion. For the sake of their happiness we do not tell children the whole truth. Discretion teaches how far it is wise to go. Similarly I was now convinced that a certain concealment of the truth on my part (a by no means dishonourable concealment) might occasionally be necessary to ensure Sophia's happiness. To let loose boundless activities when there is no scope is folly. Their unguided vigour is capable of wrecking domestic peace.

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Moreover, for this reticence in dealing with facts, my wife herself had set the example. In presenting me with the fur coat on my birthday, she had thought it well not to tell me that her late husband had worn it. Her object was commendable. She wished to give me pleasure, spare my feelings, and at the same time to exercise a reasonable economy. To attain this end she did not disdain to sacrifice an ugly fact. For the same reason a modified form of candour was now required of me. I exercised it at breakfast. Whilst my replies to Sophia's questions satisfied her curiosity, I was careful that they should not provoke her imprudence. I even persuaded her to defer enjoying her triumph over Mrs. Strood senior on the grounds that the delay of a day or two would add to its completeness.

'My stepmother,' I said, 'in spite of many excellent qualities, is indiscreet, and in the exasperation of the moment capable of telling Miss Darley what you have said. Now, we cannot afford to quarrel with Miss Darley—at least I can't. However unmaidenly — if I may use the word — her conduct to Rivers, I cannot forget what I owe her.'

'You mean,' said Sophia, complacently walking into a flattering trap, 'that she brought us together? No doubt she did, John; but don't forget the other reasons for treating her indulgently. She was not quite nicely treated by you.'

'Please don't refer to anything so painful,' I returned, blushing.

Alas! as the poet says, though not quite in the same words, 'even the heart nearest our own knows not half the reason why we smile or sigh!'

Leaving my wife to nurse this flattering illusion, I

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hurried off to Lincoln's Inn, where I learned that Diana Leighton was staying at one of the big hotels between Charing Cross and Whitehall.

From Lincoln's Inn I made my way to the League offices in Victoria Street. Finding nothing to detain me there, I started to Northumberland Avenue by way of the Embankment. It was a beautiful wintry day. Under the mantle of pale-pink mist and mother-of-pearl woven by the spirits of the air, London was charming with the delicate but majestic beauty alien eyes were the first to glorify. The bridges, spanning the rolling tide, shadowy and unsubstantial, were bearing a dim yet murmuring traffic. Steeples and great chimneys, the proud towers of Westminster, the tall shafts on the Surrey side, floated in magic air. Sounds were hushed, the massive line of hotels, and great houses bending to the curve of the river, resembled the fairy cities which Turner painted with an enchanted brush. Beneath this iridescent and tremulous light the manifold life below was touched with the spirit of romance. The craft on the river stirred in picturesque activities; thousands of gulls were hovering about the parapets of the bridges or floating in the silver gleam of the full tide.

When I was nearly opposite the broad avenue where stood the hotel I sought, I stopped to watch the flight of the sea-birds. As I stood musing partly on the scene before me, partly on the difficulty of my thankless errand, a familiar voice called me to myself.

'Was ever the river more beautiful, Mr. Strood?'

Charis Darley was beside me. The soft pink in the skies coloured her cheek, her eyes were shining

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and her lips parted. There was something predatory in her beauty.

'I suppose,' said I, 'that you have been to the stores, Miss Darley, and like the rest of us that you came on here to see the gulls?'

'I 've not been to the stores. I 've been *there!*'—a movement of her head and shoulders pointed to the hotel—'and I believe that you are going there too. Perhaps it 's fortunate I was first!'

Dismay seized me. There seemed no limit to her audacity.

'But,' I exclaimed indignantly, 'you 've never met Diana Leighton!'

'That was why I went to see her! I hate misunderstandings. Only cowards submit to them. Now we both understand.'

'What do you understand?' I asked.

'All we need understand. I respect her, and—look at that line of sea-gulls on the black barge and their reflection! Silver and ebony.'

But I filled in the suggested phrase.

'And,' I repeated slowly, 'you are sorry for her.'

'Why should I be sorry?'

'You know best,' I replied, with repressed anger.

'If I know best, you 'll forgive me for advising you. Don't tell her what you 've come to say!'

'Some one must,' I replied.

'I 've done that.'

'What! you?' I exclaimed. 'You couldn't.'

'Why not?'

'I can't tell you, although perhaps I might make Lawrence Rivers understand.'

'What an ungenerous threat!'

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'A threat, Miss Darley! It's an effort on the side of right.'

She looked at me a moment thoughtfully rather than angrily as she replied: 'Do you know, Mr. Strood, our conversations are generally ridiculous, and it's your fault. You will insist on being melodramatic. If you would only understand me I am the most practical woman, differing from others only because I know exactly what I want. Now I wonder what on earth you want.'

'Justice done!' I retorted recklessly.

'I wish I understood you,' she answered.

The pink on her cheeks had deepened, but I was too angry to care.

'Go on, Miss Darley,' I said, 'trample on us all! Spoil my friendship with Rivers, sacrifice every one to your ambition. There's little a beautiful woman will not wreck to get her own way.'

'If I had learned my part, Mr. Strood, I should give—a laugh of wicked triumph, do they call it?—but I'm reasonable and, as my aunt says, "dreadfully modern," so I won't fight. All you and I can do is to make as little mischief as possible. Good-bye!'

Then she turned and walked towards Westminster, erect and graceful, beautiful and fearless. I had made a fool of myself, not because (as I fear she imagined) I was jealous, but because I was just!

When she had disappeared amid the throng on the Embankment, I crossed the road and went up the avenue to the hotel and sent up my card.

A lift shot me up to Mrs. Leighton's private room. I found her standing by the mantelpiece to receive me. Then as she greeted me I compared the meet-

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ing with our first, years before, at Oxford, recalling how, in my youthful and unselfish ardour, I had told myself that no lovelier woman had ever inspired a poet. The impression made on me had been dazzling. All the romantic emotions of my heart had placed her in the world 'where Dido died and Guinevere sinned.' But now? Though still handsome and imposing, the lustre of her beauty seemed to me to have faded before the vision of the radiant girl I had just left. And this quiet, self-restrained, disappointed woman I had once compared to 'a luminous cloud.' But alas! the fire that burned behind it had been quenched; of the cloud only the colourless shape remained.

But what was there that those two women could say to each other? It was no selfish curiosity which made me wonder. I looked intently for some signs of the struggle, but although she seemed sad and tired, I could see no clear traces behind a joyless smile.

My sense of right may be simple and old-fashioned. So long as Diana Leighton's husband had lived I had thought—as far as I dared I had said it too—that Charis Darley had the stronger claim. Now death had come to shift the balance, and the man had made his choice—not where obligation pointed but where passion drew.

We stood and faced the icy fact, each of us conscious that it chilled the other.

'You know why Lawrence went to Rome?' I began.

'I know everything,' she answered.

'I met Miss Darley on the Embankment,' I went on, 'and guessed more than she dared tell me.'

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'What did she tell you?' she asked.

'She said she had been to see you because she hated misunderstandings, and that now you both understood. Did you think it brave of her?'

'Brave is no word for it. She gave me the message Lawrence went to Rome to deliver. That's why we understand.

'I'm not blind,' Diana continued, 'perhaps I see clearer because I am no longer young. She told me what she wanted. She asked me not to stand in her way. She told me what you told me at Folkestone.'

'What was that?'

'That, after all, what he was offering her could only be the second best. If I had a spark of generous feeling I could not grudge her this.'

'Good heavens!' I cried. 'What new sex philosophy is teaching women to fight openly for what they pretend they scarcely dare hunt in secret?'

'It isn't philosophy, and it isn't new,' Diana replied.

'She's frank when frankness pays, cunning when cunning suits her. So was Lady Macbeth. In all ages,' I went on, angered by Diana's tragic calm, 'women have been tyrants. Charis Darley is only the newest and least scrupulous type. How disastrous it will prove to the race the next generations will discover.'

The bitterness I had been collecting was flowing through me. Diana dammed it up.

'Ah! I forgot,' said she; 'I forgot. Her triumphant car rolled over you too!'

'Then the heartless girl has boasted of it!' I exclaimed, rather to raise her anger than appease my own.

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Diana shook her head.

'And yet they say women are jealous!' she said quietly.

'Jealous!' I replied with truth, 'jealous! Yes, I am jealous—jealous of Lawrence Rivers's future in her hands!'

But a page-boy, bearing a card, interrupted me.

A gentleman to see Mrs. Leighton at once.

'Show him up,' she answered, glancing at the card.

'Rivers, of course!' said I. 'I was expecting him.'

'Yes, it's Lawrence,' she answered, apparently quite unmoved.

'Then I'll go and leave you together,' I said, recovering the self-control which I had lost.

'No, stay and help me,' she answered. 'You can spare us both a painful interview. I know Lawrence; you don't—at least not as I do. You've seen my sickness. Now you shall see me swallow the remedy.'

We waited, hearing the rush of the ascending lift and hurried steps along the corridor. The door opened, Rivers passed swiftly in.

'Diana!' he exclaimed, deeply agitated, 'Diana!' Then, seeing me, he stopped abruptly and muttered (I hope I was not intended to hear), 'What does he want here?'

'Mr. Strood is here, Lawrence, because I made him come,' Diana interposed quickly. 'He has been advising me about my affairs. I'm so sorry—so dreadfully sorry about this mistake. I ought to have let you know, but it all happened so quickly. There was so little time. But it's like you to ru-

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across Europe in the cause — in the cause of friendship.'

Rivers looked wretched—weary, travel-stained, fretted with anxiety, for he was not the man to commit a meanness with the air of a generous conqueror.

'Diana,' he cried, 'I 've a thousand things to say, but I can't say them with him here.'

He glanced at me as at a thing creating an irritation out of all proportion to its importance, whilst I, remembering days when my counsel had been sought and honoured, tasted the bitterness of friendship despised.

The hostile influence was drawing him from me.

'I stayed,' I said, 'because Mrs. Leighton desired it, not because it could cause me anything but pain.'

But he looked at Diana and never heeded me.

'Sit down there, Lawrence,' she said gently, pointing to an armchair, 'and don't be irritable. Because your kindness to me has sent you on a wasted journey, it is no reason why you should be angry with poor Mr. Strood.'

And now I guessed the nature of her remedy. It was submission. It seemed that I was to be thrust on my knees too.

Her voice, always tender to him, now seemed to sting him with its caress. Sinking back in the chair he watched her. What he was bent on saying must have grievously hurt him. It had burned out the look of youth in the man. I almost forgave him for his rudeness to me as I saw the change wrought by love and remorse.

Here at least was a soul whom the Furies had scourged with their whips.

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'A wasted journey more or less in a misspent life is of no great account, Diana,' he said. 'It is the awful road we whip ourselves along—leaving fragments of our heart on the track—that breaks our spirit and our courage.'

He was forgetting that I was present, but, casting a swift look in my direction with his harassed feverish eyes, he stopped abruptly. All my curiosity—the curiosity of the artist—awoke as I watched him.

'I think I'd better go,' I said, rising; 'I'm only in the way!'

Perhaps when we are least proud of our own conduct we most want a scapegoat.

'Besides you have a wife at home, Strood, from whom I understand no secrets are hidden!'

As Rivers flung this gibe at me, I felt our friendship withering under its blight.

I was moving towards the door in silence when Diana Leighton stopped me.

'Don't go, Mr. Strood!' she said. 'Please don't go!'

And so I resumed my seat.

'My dear Lawrence,' she continued, turning to him, 'do be calm. Your nerves are all unstrung. You look as though you had not slept for weeks. For heaven's sake don't worry yourself! There's nothing you can tell me that I don't already know! You hate saying it, so please don't try. You and I are old friends who have a right to spare themselves pain. Besides Miss Darley has been here, and I quite understand—yes, quite understand! I was about to write to you to clear up all doubt, but the writing wasn't easy, so I put it off, and that's why we have all been worried unnecessarily!'

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The look on Rivers's face as she spoke grew intense, as though feeling were stretched to its utmost limit.

'Leave us!' he said to me.

This time Diana did not stop me.

I closed the door softly, waiting, however, a moment on the threshold.

'My God, Diana,' I heard him cry, 'forgive me if you can!'

And I knew that he was sobbing in her lap.

Who but a poet is capable of weeping in the arms of one woman because he loves another?

I say this in no disparagement of poets, for certain pangs of my own have taught me too that the wisest of us as well as the dullest are alike unprotected against the attacks of this devastating but, if we believe the physiologists, necessary passion. There are, however, limits even in our unreason, nor can I be too grateful for that from which my own self-control has saved me.

As I look back on her havoc it seems to me that Charis Darley represents rather an anarchic force in the established order of sex-relationship than the latest type in progressive womanhood.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

WHEN I left the hotel I returned to the office of the League a prey to resentment and misgivings, wounded in my tenderest spot.

Although Rivers belonged to the race of gifted people who must be allowed to do as they like, there were, nevertheless, some limits to my forbearance. I was not like Diana Leighton — able to stoop to the foot that spurned me. My manhood stood in the way. Besides even her graceful yielding concealed a purpose. She still desired to treasure what remained to her of the friendship of a famous man. She knew his character and his weaknesses. There might be crumbs for her yet to give him which no other hand could bestow. Her very attitude of touching resignation had served an end. It had reduced Rivers to weep in her lap!

(How I wish Charis Darley could have witnessed the scene!)

Thus from one point of view Mrs. Leighton's dignity was safe, however deep her wound.

Rivers, however, was unlikely to weep on my shoulder and beg my forgiveness! Had he but said 'I'm sorry, John!' how easily could I have forgotten, but when we met in Victoria Street two hours after the scene in Diana's room he ignored it. Moreover his abrupt and dictatorial manner

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was far from suggesting regret. He was marching to other music than mine.

Charis Darley had evidently made him acquainted with the situation at the League. He listened with some impatience whilst I further explained it.

'I've promised Dr. Barker,' I said, 'to let him know your views at once.'

'You can't do that,' he answered, 'for I'm not sure of them myself!'

'He's dreadfully suspicious!' I protested. 'He was scarcely satisfied when I told him that you wouldn't support the general's scheme of national military service without the collective sanction of the League.'

'You had no right to tell him that!'

'I had to keep him quiet. Remember you left me without instructions. The last time we talked it over you agreed that it was still too soon for the League to take sides in this controversy.'

'Probably I said so to avoid a tedious argument with you, but I can't remember.'

Was this a kind or fair answer to an old friend and loyal secretary?

I said no more, but turned away to my own desk and pretended to study the list of new subscribing members.

Soon after this he left the office, whilst I returned home, suffering under an oppressive sense of ill-usage.

What was Rivers's intention? Did he wish to compel me to resign? If he did, my sense of duty to the League would not permit me to gratify him at the present crisis.

I was, of course, not blind to the cause of his

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changed attitude towards me. It was due, I knew, to the influence of Miss Darley, with whom I had differed on the question of our policy. She desired to expel from the League what she most unjustly called the 'little England lot.' It represented, however, too powerful an element to be sacrificed to the whim of an obstinate girl. My plea for moderation she ridiculed as 'a policy of pew-openers and parasites.'

I had hitherto merely regarded her ideas on this subject as those of an autocratic young woman whose inexperience deprived them of importance. Now, however, that I found them colouring the mind of our president, I realised their peculiar danger.

Warned by the observation of recent events, I decided to tell my wife no more than was absolutely necessary to maintain a reputation for candour. Miss Darley's hint that she would refrain from 'making mischief' if I would follow her example, forbade me speaking to my wife of her visit to Diana Leighton. The boldness of this step would certainly have 'shocked' Sophia, who when she was 'shocked' 'spoke her mind' with greater energy than discretion. Moreover, her simple and robust methods ill suited a crisis of such extreme delicacy. I merely told her, therefore, that Mrs. Leighton, who was perfectly reasonable, showed no wish to obstruct a marriage which seemed the only remedy for a compromising entanglement. As this was the solution to which Sophia's sagacity had pointed from the first, she warmly approved of it. Her complacency, however, was somewhat checked when I disclosed the state of affairs at the League and

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the threatened departure from the policy of moderation on which I had always insisted. This view she supported with the apt, if trite, illustration of the Bundle of Sticks. 'If,' she said, 'we split into groups, each with a different idea of what constitutes civic duty, what's to become of the secretary?'

'What indeed?' I answered. 'You may rest assured, my dear, that he will do his duty to the League as long as possible, although there are undercurrents at work which may compel him to resign.'

'Resign four hundred pounds a year!' cried Sophia in dismay.

'The situation in Victoria Street,' I said, 'may be made intolerable.'

I now fortified my position by telling Sophia of Rivers's cruel gibe at her expense.

It roused her indignation in spite of her strongly expressed opinion that 'only fools quarrelled with their bread and butter.'

The man who did not trust his wife, she declared, was a dishonourable and mean-spirited creature unworthy of the respect of a good woman! She was, she further remarked, astounded that so distinguished a man as Mr. Rivers should have dared to utter such a sentiment, even though he did belong to the class which made the worst husbands!

These reflections naturally led her a step further, for she was fond of tracing things to their most flattering sources.

The reason for Rivers's altered conduct to me she discovered in the affections of Miss Darley which I was supposed to have slighted! This aberration,

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which had at first amused me by its recurrence, nearly deprived me of my calm. I am a just, not a vain man!

'You know,' she said, 'what her grievance is better than I, and must make allowances for it.'

'I cannot admit,' I said firmly, 'that Miss Darley has any grievance against me.'

'Men never do admit these things, I know,' returned Sophia calmly. 'As for me, I never see her unless she makes me feel I had no right to be Mrs. John Strood! You needn't look like that, John, I assure you I'm not the least jealous. But I leave you to your reflections and your cigar.'

With this she quitted the dining-room, greatly to my relief. By some strange compensatory process in the adjustment of human affairs, those nearest our affections are too often endowed with the shrewdest faculty of annoying us. I say this out of no disrespect to my wife, who in this differed little from the wives of other men, but simply as a candid observer of conjugal phenomena gradually gathering experience.

With the approval of Sophia, and as evidence of just resentment at my treatment, I now decided to maintain only official relations with Rivers—to accept instructions but offer no advice.

A night's rest, however, and possibly the feeling of freedom, restored his serenity. His energy returned, his easy mocking good-temper with it. But the change in him only brought me fresh mortifications. It is true that he no longer spoke harshly to me, but on the other hand he seemed to regard me as an amiable fussy person whose opinion and personality carry weight only because they are

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supported by the associations of friendship. A horrible whisper reached me.

Coming to the office one morning a few minutes earlier than usual, I stood by the semi-opaque half-opened glass door of my room and carelessly glanced in. Watson, my clerk, who stood at my table arranging the papers, was holding a conversation with the typewriter in the adjoining cabinet, whence I could hear her machine clicking out its daily task.

'Mr. Rivers says,' called out the youth, 'that he's like the old servant whom you can't sack—a sort of fixture to be fed, flattered, and fooled till pension-time comes. Ha! ha! ha!'

Here I entered the room, and Watson—an intelligent lad of eighteen—ceased laughing, and greeted me with a vivid blush and a loud 'Good morning, sir!' as a warning of my arrival to Miss Brex, the typewriter.

I said nothing for the moment, but an arrow shot in the dark had pierced my heart.

Who was like an old servant who could not be 'sacked'? Although the word was one which I had never heard Rivers use, it might well have been substituted by Watson to interpret his meaning.

Of whom could this have been said? Both Watson and Miss Brex, I was well aware, considered me 'fussy'—the epithet is applied by subordinates to most men who insist on efficient service—but their disapproval of my methods was scarcely a reason for their reception into the jocular confidences of Rivers! To whom, then, had it been said?

There is a form of curiosity which is unendurable.

At last I was compelled to question Watson, in order, at whatever risks, to relieve it.

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After pretending to read the *Times*, dictating a letter or two, and giving a few trivial directions about the business of the day, I said as coolly as I could :

'By the bye, Mr. Watson, when I came in just now I overheard you telling Miss Brex something about an old servant whom Mr. Rivers considered ought to be "sacked." May I ask whether our president made these remarks to you?'

Again the clerk grew crimson.

'No, sir,' he replied; 'they were made to Miss Darley. She came in here yesterday with Mr. Rivers after you had gone.'

'Have you any idea who the unfortunate menial may be to whom Mr. Rivers referred?' I inquired, with icy calm.

Watson's embarrassment deepened.

'No, sir,' he answered; 'unless they were talking about a servant of Miss Darley's or of some one employed down at Mr. Rivers's place in the country.'

'But why—I 'm not questioning you out of idle curiosity, Mr. Watson, but simply as an impartial observer of human peculiarities—why should you repeat a statement made by Mr. Rivers about a person of whom you know nothing to Miss Brex, who presumably knows less?'

'Just for something to say, sir.'

'Indeed, Watson?'

'You see, everything Mr. Rivers says is interesting, sir,' continued the clerk, plunging restively. 'As he said the other day, the papers are full of what he doesn't say, so naturally what he does say interests Miss Brex and me.'

'Even when you 've no idea whom he is talking about?'

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'Even when we don't know whom he is talking about, sir.'

'Thank you, Mr. Watson, for a very lucid explanation. I suppose Mr. Rivers knew of whom he was speaking?'

'I suppose so, sir,' replied the young man, growing slightly defiant under cross-examination.

'Perhaps I had better ask Mr. Rivers,' I said coolly.

'I hope you will not, sir!'

'Why not?'

'Because Mr. Rivers would be very angry with me for repeating what he said to Miss Darley by way of a joke. I had taken some things into Miss Brex's room to be typed, sir, so they didn't know I could hear.'

'I see, Mr. Watson. But it was all a joke, was it?'

'It must have been, sir, for they laughed like anything, and Miss Darley said "Poor old thing!"'

'Then evidently she understood the joke, Mr. Watson!'

'Evidently, sir.'

'Will you kindly deal with these, Mr. Watson.'

Here I gave him some receipts to acknowledge, and our conversation ceased, but not before it had filled the atmosphere of the office of the League with the taint of a hideous suspicion, under which the dignity of the secretary seemed rapidly withering.

I had loved Lawrence Rivers once and could not afford to unlove him now. But did I love him? We ask ourselves the question we cannot answer when the mind, numbed under the impact of a deadening shock, is incapable of response.

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But whether I loved him or not, I felt incapable of meeting him.

Fortunately it was not one of the days on which he came to the office. Before I left, therefore, I told Watson that I should probably be absent for a few days, but would send him my address in case it should be necessary to communicate with me.

Leaving the office about three o'clock, I called to see Dr. Scaber, the famous nerve specialist. We had been in the same form at Archester, where he had exhibited none of that genial and reassuring suavity of manner which in later life had won him eminence in a noble profession.

His waiting-room was full, but I sent in my card with a pencilled note, and, because I was an old schoolfellow, he generously consented to see me out of my turn.

'Nothing wrong, I hope, Strood?' he said, as the door of the consulting-room closed behind me. It was full of rather bad pictures purchased at the Royal Academy (Scaber fancied he was a connoisseur in art—his one weakness), and he had hung his walls with preposterous landscapes and tedious 'historical pieces' ('Henry V. after Agincourt,' for instance) under the erroneous impression that they created the atmosphere of refined culture which intelligent neuropathic patients preferred to breathe.

'Not quite the thing, Scaber,' I replied. 'A little out of sorts, you know.'

'Sit down and let me look at you.'

He placed me in a chair opposite the light and examined me critically.

'You 're not a nephalist, I see, Strood.'

'What 's that?' I asked a little anxiously, for even

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though you are seeking only moral support of your doctor, you are never quite sure what sinister discoveries he may make.

'I mean, you use alcohol.'

We had shared a bottle and a pint of champagne at the last old-Archestrian dinner (Rivers had been in the chair), consequently his divination did not astound me.

'Yes,' said I, 'in moderation, but at all my meals and a peg or two before turning in. But it isn't the food and the drink—although, you know, I 've a wretched digestion. The truth is, I 'm suffering from a sort of all-overish feeling. It isn't exactly giddiness, or fatigue, or sleepiness, nor yet insomnia; it's a sort of mixture of them all. In fact, it 's brain-fag! That admirable article of yours in the *Popular Pleader* made my symptoms quite clear, so I needn't ask you to sound me, Scaber, or take up any of your valuable time (there 's a whole roomful waiting for you!), but just say the word that you think I 'm overworked, and want a change to the seaside, and I feel sure that I shall come back a new man!'

'Seems to me, Strood,' said he, 'that you 're prescribing for yourself.'

'It 's because your article foresaw both the symptoms and the remedy,' I replied.

'Well, now I look at you, you do seem pulled down. I 'll tell you what! Go down to the New Bath Hotel at Brighton (I 'm one of the directors, you know), mention my name, and they 'll make you comfortable. Take a Scaber electric bath every other day (I tried to prevent them from using my name, but it was no good), and when the week 's out you 'll be fit enough to play all the bowling they

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send down to the what-you-may-call-'em League off your own bat.'

'Thanks, Scaber,' I replied, rising; 'it's very kind of you. I feel better already.'

'By the bye,' he said, standing beside me, whilst the firelight danced on the diamond-pin (the gift of a grateful lady-patient) which fastened the folds of his simple *crêpe-de-Chine* scarf, 'by the bye, Strood, how are things going on with "the great man"?'

Lawrence Rivers was always known as 'the great man' among old Archestrians.

'All right,' I exclaimed.

'All right? What do you mean by "all right"?—unless Rivers intends to marry both ladies or they are both bent on marrying him! Miss Leigh (Miss Darley's aunt, you know) is a sort of patient of mine when the newspapers frighten her off Christian Science or whatever rubbish it is she runs after.'

'I know,' said I, 'she has a bad circulation and suffers from cold feet. I remember giving her a carbon-pederette to warm them last Christmas.'

'Ah, that was when you were supposed to be engaged to the girl,' he interrupted.

'Nonsense! I never was engaged to her!'

'No? Well, I'm glad to hear that, Strood! Miss Darley will be able to reign at Beckstone Park and rule "the great man" with a clear conscience then!'

'I think we may take that for granted, Doctor!' I returned cheerfully.

'Capital, Strood, capital! Quite the best thing both for the lady and "the great man." Good-bye!'

Then as we shook hands I neatly slipped a pound and a shilling into his soft palm.

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'Half fees for poor old schoolfellows, eh, Doctor?' said I jovially.

'Since you insist,' said he, with some reluctance.

'By the bye, Scaber,' said I, halting by the door, for I had forgotten something of importance, 'by the bye, you never said whether I should take my wife with me. You see I hate leaving her, but I think on the whole, you know, since I want complete rest, not to say solitude——'

'Exactly!' replied Scaber, hastily ringing the bell; 'my orders are that you go to Brighton alone. Tell Mrs. Strood so with my compliments!'

'Thanks, Scaber.'

Then I withdrew and walked the pavement of Harley Street, the first part of my task accomplished.

I was trying to flee from myself.

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CHAPTER XXIX

WHEN a man is trying to flee from himself it is usually because he is trying to hide from disappointment.

I glanced down and up Harley Street. At each end hovered a whisp of fog, the London cousin of hoar-frost.

It was too soon to go home and to explain to Sophia the necessity of complete rest from worry at the seaside which Dr. Scaber had imposed on me, so I strolled to Bond Street, where in the shop of a well-known tobacconist I lighted a cigar, and gradually fell into a pleasanter train of thought. Bond Street exists chiefly for administering to the pleasures of the eye. The severity of the English race, so far as it is possible, has been banished from the kingdom of which it is the unofficial centre. I stood before the windows of a jeweller's shop, dreamily admiring sprays of diamonds scintillating in the brightness of the electric light. There were tiaras and bracelets, sapphires, moonstones, pearls, emeralds, turquoises, and stones whose names I knew not. Behind the plate-glass 'the giddy pleasures of the eye' were revelling naked and unashamed, raising in the gazer's mind visions of the fair women on whose white throats or queenly brows these glittering gems might most worthily shine.

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Then—my thoughts turning in a nobler direction to the—

> 'Jewels five words long
> That on the stretched forefinger of all time
> Sparkle for ever,'

I was meditating, as becomes a philosopher amid such luxurious association, on the vanity of female ideals, when once again the familiar voice startled me.

'What surprise are you preparing for Mrs. Strood?' it said mockingly.

'Such surprises, Miss Darley,' I replied, 'are beyond the powers of my poor purse. The diamonds gave me the usual food for reflection.'

'"The vanity of human wishes," Mr. Strood, and all the rest of it, of course?'

'Yes. "The vanity of human wishes," Miss Darley. I've just been to see Dr. Scaber, who has ordered me off to Brighton. Complete rest and freedom from worry, he says, are necessary for me.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, after a brief examination of my face; 'it seems to me that you're looking better than usual. I know your wife thinks so. In any case, I shouldn't think that great black end of a cigar was good for you.'

I flung it away.

'You see, Miss Darley,' I said, 'I've had a good deal to worry me at the League. Rivers isn't sure what policy to follow, Dr. Barker, on the other hand, has no doubts, whilst I come between them and preach moderate views.'

'Moderate views!' she exclaimed. 'You know what I think of them. However, the thing is settled now. Lawrence will support national military train-

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ing for all the League is worth! Those who differ from it can walk out and found a "League of Pew-openers" for themselves!'

'He has told me nothing of all this!' I said, in some annoyance.

'We only decided on it at lunch to-day,' replied the triumphant young woman.

I looked at her in the bright light flashed from the sparkling jeweller's shop. She was in furs and a fur hat crowned with gallant aigrette. The frosty air had touched her cheeks with deeper colour. She seemed radiant even for her, and extraordinarily full of youth and that intangible feminine resource which is not called strength although so much more effective.

'Well, I only hope the new policy will be successful,' I replied. 'The first effect of it will be to split the League.'

'A good thing too! We shall get rid of the mean little tail then. I sometimes regret I'm not a man! Men love compromises. Half of you are political time-servers. Thank heaven Lawrence sees the right thing at last! All of you people—his old friends and acquaintances—have made the worst of him. You've tried to cut his wings and make him flap in step with the clumsy crowd of so-called public men, who are afraid of offending either the mob or the flabby shapeless thing they call public opinion! Every one knows what this country wants'—and she flung back her beautiful head till the delicate plume in her hat quivered—'we want discipline! I was talking to a famous soldier the other night, Mr. Strood. The future of the Empire, he assures me, depends entirely on the amount of

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soldiering the people are prepared to learn to defend it. Every one outside a bonnet shop or a grocery store knows that, and yet when your League has a chance of doing its duty, you and men like you talk of "the necessity of moderate views"! I've no patience with you all!'

'Miss Darley,' I replied (for playfulness is often the best retort to tirades of this kind), 'Miss Darley, I'm afraid you're quite a firebrand.'

'And you're a wet blanket, and consequently useless in a damp place!'

'Well, we won't argue about it,' I said. 'Besides there isn't room on the pavement.'

She laughed and recovered her temper.

'I'm going to the library to meet my aunt, who is changing a book, but doesn't know what she wants. It takes some time, for she's always afraid of getting something she calls "realistic" by mistake.'

'Miss Leigh,' I replied, 'is right. You never know what dreadful book you may bring home from the library! The old English reticence is fast disappearing. Novelists choose the most revolting subjects, and a certain class of readers encourage them in the selection.'

We were walking back towards the library. The men we passed glanced admiringly at my companion.

'I don't care,' she said, '(I mean within decent limits) what people write about, so long as they don't pose. I'm sick of attitudes!'

'But then, Miss Darley, you are emancipated!' I said.

'If that means that I won't let people treat me as an idiot, I am, Mr. Strood! Do you superintend your wife's reading?'

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'I 'm thankful to say,' I answered, 'that she has a correct taste. She thinks there are so many unpleasant things in real life that it 's unnecessary to look for them in books.'

'Ah!' Miss Darley replied; 'then the newspapers will satisfy her curiosity!'

At Bruton Street the traffic stopped us for a moment. When we had crossed it she resumed the conversation, but in a more serious mood.

'I 'm glad I met you,' she began. 'There 's something I want to say. Dr. Scaber is sending you out of town, it seems?'

'Rest, electric baths, and that sort of thing,' I put in hastily. 'I intend to write to Rivers to-night.'

'Don't trouble to do that, Mr. Strood; I 'll explain. In fact I 've a capital idea! Whilst you 're away I 'll do your work.'

'My dear Miss Darley!' I protested.

'I assure you I shall enjoy it; Lawrence would love it. You 'll have a chance of a well-deserved holiday!'

'But, Miss Darley, you don't quite realise what it means!' I said, with the helpless sense of being thrust out of the way by an irresistibly cheerful force.

'It means I 'll help Lawrence cut the League's miserable tail off!' she replied, with charming energy.

Then I made up my mind to speak out.

'I hope you will pardon me for what I 'm about to say, Miss Darley, but your undertaking to manage Mr. Rivers's affairs suggests a more complete understanding between you than the world yet recognises. May I, as an old friend, ask whether I may be permitted to congratulate him?'

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'You may congratulate me,' she cried, with sparkling eyes; 'I 'm the happiest woman in England!'

'I do so with all my heart,' I said. 'I ought to have seen it from the first, only the folly—the folly from which the strongest of us are not free, and from which even Lawrence Rivers is not exempt—blinded me.'

'Thank you for the compliment,' she answered, laughing. 'You mean Lawrence must be a fool for wanting to marry me!'

Had this dazzling young woman no modesty, I wondered, that she dared to rejoice openly over a victory won by manœuvres which all the most refined traditions of her sex forbade her to practise?

'That is not a fair thing to say, especially to me, Miss Darley,' I answered reproachfully. 'I simply meant to suggest that you recognised his great merit from the first (I remember your request for his signed photograph before you knew him!), and that now you have done all that a woman can to signify your respect and admiration for him!'

'Respect and admiration, Mr. Strood! Fiddlesticks! I love him with all my heart, and am not ashamed to say so! I know exactly what you're thinking and that you're afraid to say it. And I don't bear you the slightest grudge. When a woman is perfectly natural, people make a point of depriving her of a character! But here we are at the library. Good-bye! Have a nice rest at the seaside, come back, if you can, with more energetic views of civic duty, and don't tell your wife anything to place me in the light of a virago!'

With that she left me, overcome with regret that one so full of physical charm should be so destitute

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of those soft and tender graces which we associate with all that we most reverence in woman.

Charis Darley had captured Rivers as she intended, but could I believe her capable of making him happy after his passion had outgrown the rapture of his first enthusiasm?

I thought regretfully of his future prospects and those of the League as I walked home to break the news to my wife.

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CHAPTER XXX

IN England there is a perfect equality of tolerant contempt so long as it remains unexpressed. The ideals of one profession, and often of one class, may be the derision of all the others. The illogical turmoil of opinion thus produced affords fertile soil for the cultivation of the party spirit. Of this Miss Darley and Lawrence Rivers were striking examples. The former's contempt for what she impudently called 'politics for pew-openers,' and the latter's disdain of all human activities undriven by the highest intelligence, were each in its way typical of the disrespect in which one section of the community may hold all the others. Hitherto the League had prospered and established branches all over the kingdom because dangerous definitions had been avoided. The tough blunt-edged spirit of our race enables us to remain blind to what we don't want to see. Civic ideals are held by all earnest people however standards may differ. Our League had prospered and attracted liberal subscriptions from unconscious holders of conflicting views, because our scheme was as generous as vague. Principles without definition had roughly represented our policy. It had been rather a hothouse for cultivating the civic virtues generally than for forcing any brand of them in particular. There had sprung up among us, however, in conse-

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quence of the alleged success of continental methods, an energetic group of members bent on encouraging the martial spirit, no matter at what sacrifice. Thanks chiefly to the moderate views which I had succeeded in instilling into Rivers, they had been permitted to advance no further than Dr. Barker and his friends were prepared to follow. Now, however, all that I had been able to do to moderate the pace of the League was threatened with immediate destruction, to satisfy the passing whim of an ambitious young woman, who, because she had won the heart, had also caught the ear of our leader, a poet by temperament and an organiser by accident.

It had become, therefore, my plain duty to warn Rivers before it was too late. On my way home, therefore, I stopped at the club, and wrote him a warning letter, pointing out the dangers to which (if Miss Darley's account of his projected policy were accurate) he was exposing the fortunes of the association.

Having thus relieved my mind, I went home and told my wife of my visit to Dr. Scaber and its results. Sophia, however, who I must say has her faults, attributed my 'brain-fag' to an indiscriminating use of tobacco and stimulants. The advocate of total abstinence from tobacco and alcohol for the working classes, she desired to try the effect of similar austerity on her husband. She had urged the same course of life on her late husband; indeed, I had heard her suggest that his neglect of her advice was one of the main causes of his death. On this subject I am not in a position to offer an opinion.

The professor, however, had not only failed to

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accept this advice, he had also refused to see a doctor until it was too late, consequently my precautionary measure made my position stronger than his.

Moreover, Sophia had met Dr. Scaber (he was present at our wedding), and had been impressed by a specialist whose name had appeared with those of other eminent men under a bulletin published to reassure public anxiety concerning the health of the head of a great ducal house, popularly believed to be suffering from kleptomania. She therefore decided that I must follow Scaber's advice, in spite of her personal disapproval of it. Its absurdity, as I pointed out to her, struck me too; still, in such cases, I argued, a wise man defers to the opinion of his physician until experiment proves it valueless. It seemed cruel, I continued, to separate us at a moment when, morally speaking, I most needed her sympathy; but even for condemning me to solitude, Scaber had, I presumed, some reason which the layman could not recognise.

On the following morning, therefore, after an affectionate farewell, I left London, and instead of going to the Bath-Cure Establishment, whither Scaber had directed me, I took up my quarters at the Bedford Hotel, fully persuaded that its pleasanter situation and solid British comfort more than compensated for the hydropathic conveniences offered amid less congenial surroundings. Here I spent several contemplative days watching far-off sails steal ghostlike across the dim verge of the wintry horizon, or in agreeable converse with Miss Flora Eldon, the eminent and charming comedienne, then recuperating at the Metropole with her mother, Mrs.

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Macvittie, whose late husband had been my father's old friend.

For several years I had not been out of 'harness.' I now discovered how much the collar had rubbed me.

I had decided it would serve Rivers right (he had not replied to my letter) to let him find out how ill he could afford to do without my assistance. From Watson I received, however, some disquieting information. 'Dr. Barker had been snubbed'; the protests of the 'pew-opener party,' as Miss Darley called them, treated with indifference.

Miss Darley, I learned, came almost daily to Victoria Street, apparently 'making hay' with the interests of the League. For the consequences of Rivers's vehement acceptance of the doctrine that the citizen's first debt to the State is to fight for it, and to insist, as a right, on being efficiently taught how, I was consequently fully prepared; but I purposely absented myself from that sinister but historic meeting when, if the figure be permitted me, he flung the League at the feet of the group of eminent soldiers then endeavouring to drag their fellow-countrymen into the reactionary net of militarism by threatening them with the point of the German bayonet.

Thus, owing to the intervention of a rash young woman, and the amatory weakness of a man of genius, a society founded for the encouragement of civic duty in the abstract was converted into an engine of propaganda for the advancement of the views of a no doubt patriotic, but certainly a reactionary, military clique. Sweetness and light were to be abandoned for the sword and the spear,

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the rifle club, the parade ground, and the barrack square. What was the result? I regret to say I had only too clearly foreseen it. The Nonconformist members of the League, under the leadership of Dr. Barker, left in a body, unable, as they said, to support an association which aimed at compelling the State to inflict on an intelligent people the evils now rapidly undermining manhood and destroying initiative in France and Germany.

Why, it will be asked, did I remain in my Brighton Capua whilst these changes were taking place at Westminster?

My answer is a simple one.

Rivers had treated my appeal with silent disdain, and I did not wish to expose myself to a second rebuff.

Meanwhile, however, rest and sea-air had restored my health, and I returned to town to find that the League (or what remained of it) had become, in everything but name, a branch of the League of Imperial Patriots.

I returned to London by a morning train. Sophia and I had just finished lunch, and were deploring together the probable effects of the reckless spirit which had transformed the character of the League, when the servant entered the dining-room and said that Miss Darley was in the drawing-room and desired to see me.

We exchanged glances. Was it a message of peace or war? Sophia's upper lip stiffened. 'I think,' said she, 'I had better see her alone.'

But this terrified me. Sophia was in no conciliatory mood. Moreover, she had cause for offence. Her husband had been treated as a person of

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small importance! To underrate me was to lower her own position. For the slight put upon me she held Charis Darley responsible.

But there was nothing to be obtained by an open conflict now that Miss Darley's splendid prize was captured. Some day Rivers would discover his mistake in allowing her to drive me from his counsels. For this anticipated triumph we could afford to wait.

As quickly, therefore, as I could, and with more vivacity than I was accustomed to use in arguments with Sophia, I pointed out the necessity of maintaining the peace.

'My dear,' I protested, 'let us not forget what we owe Miss Darley, and in return pardon her impetuosity. She is still so inexperienced.'

'Inexperienced, John!' exclaimed my wife angrily; 'she's as clever as a monkey. I know how to behave myself in my own drawing-room, so you needn't be afraid that I shall make you look ridiculous in the eyes of the young woman you once pretended to admire. Come along!'

Then, not without apprehensions, I followed her into the drawing-room, where our visitor was standing by the window. Sophia's greeting was somewhat cold, but I endeavoured to atone for it by the warmth of my own, whilst Miss Darley watched us both with the faintest glitter in her eyes.

'Quite pleasant to be back in town,' I began. 'It's kind of you to come over to tell us all the news.'

'Yes, there *are* things you both ought to know,' she replied.

Here Sophia stepped resolutely in.

'The League has been dangerously active since

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John took his much-needed holiday. No doubt you will be relieved to replace its affairs under his quiet and discreet guidance!'

The challenge was given! It was promptly accepted. The white plume in Miss Darley's hat vibrated as she replied:

'Our policy is changed. The League has had enough lethargy. Mr. Strood knows my views.'

'Yes,' I put in, with gentle firmness; 'and whilst I admire their courage, I fear their result.'

'Well, that's what I've come over about, Mr. Strood.'

'Did Mr. Rivers send you?' asked Mrs. Strood grimly.

'He didn't send me, but he knows I've come—come as a diplomatist.'

'Exactly,' I observed blandly.

Miss Darley looked at me, but with a corner of her dancing eye on Sophia watching with a set face.

'Is diplomacy necessary?' she asked.

'About as much as we can pool between us,' Miss Darley replied.

I saw my wife's handsome nose imperceptibly wrinkle and heard the gust of an angry sniff. My nervousness increased.

'Then you have something unpleasant to say, Miss Darley?' I said.

'I don't think you ought to mind it,' she answered, 'but some one ought to say it. Like Jack the Lizard in *Alice in Wonderland* I'm put on to do all the nasty work.'

'I never read *Alice in Wonderland*,' said Sophia, in a voice that seemed unusually bass.

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'But Mr. Strood has, I'm sure. He'll understand, and perhaps help me over the tiresome places.'

Miss Darley gave me a smile of reassurance.

My wife, who naturally was disinclined to encourage such tactics, frowned.

'You know how much Lawrence dislikes saying unpleasant things, especially to his friends,' Miss Darley continued.

I had not noticed it, but let it pass.

'Well, you are one of his oldest, consequently he has the greatest claims on your indulgence. We have been thinking——'

'Who are "we"?' interrupted Sophia, in a still deeper voice.

'Lawrence and I, of course,' returned Miss Darley sweetly. 'Well, we have been thinking that it would not be fair to ask you to continue to act as secretary now that you are so strongly opposed to our policy.'

'Your policy, you mean,' muttered my wife.

But Miss Darley, deciding not to hear the remark, resumed as sweetly as ever:

'No doubt your moderate views are excellent when there's nothing particular to be done, Mr. Strood, but the League in future intends to be a whip for anæmic patriotism, not an elegant debating society for the discussion of the abstract virtues.'

'And what do you want me to do?' I asked.

'Resign at once, John, of course,' said my wife. 'That's what they want!'

'Under the circumstances I think perhaps it would be well if I were relieved of my duties. Still, Lawrence and I have been associated for many years and this sudden rupture is painful to me.'

'But there need be no rupture, Mr. Strood—I

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mean in your friendship. In any case Lawrence can be trusted to do what is right.'

'I know I can rely on his generosity,' I replied, conscious of a smothered sound from Sophia, on whose face I feared to look.

Her voice broke the long silence which followed my dignified acquiescence.

'I dare say, Miss Darley, you think that my husband is being treated with as much consideration as any salaried person can expect, and I should have no reason to complain if I did not know him to be the victim of sentiments very far removed from the politics of the League!'

Whilst my heart beat with horrible fears Miss Darley looked surprised.

'I haven't the faintest idea what you mean,' she answered. 'Mr. Strood resigns because he disapproves of the work which the League proposes to carry out. So far as I can see there is no sentiment in the matter.'

'I see what my wife means (Please be quiet, dear!),' I said desperately, before she could speak.

'Then tell Miss Darley so to her face!' cried Sophia. 'It 's time some one let her know the truth, instead of feeding her on flattery!'

'Why! what is the truth?' asked Miss Darley, astonished but unexcited.

'The truth is that you are getting my husband turned out of his place because he preferred me to you!'

Something seemed to crack within me and to fall in a shower of acrid dust. Through the confusion I heard a voice I scarcely recognised as my own exclaiming: 'Don't listen to her! Sophia doesn't mean it!'

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Miss Darley, with admirable calm, faced the storm. Either she was touched by my appeal or had a profound acquaintance with Mrs. Strood's peculiar temper. Her answer was as full of dignity as it was magnanimous and forgiving.

'If what you say were true, it would be very ungenerous of you to say it of a woman whom you once regarded as a friend!'

Her unresentful dignity staggered me by its splendour and deprived Sophia of power of speech.

In a painful silence Charis Darley made for the door without losing a shadow of her faultless serenity. She was half out of the room before my wife loosed her reply: 'I 'm glad you have the grace to admit it!'

'Hush, Sophia!' I entreated. Then I followed Miss Darley downstairs with a stream of incoherent apologies. In the hall she stopped to hear them.

'I understand, Mr. Strood,' she said; 'that's why I said what I did. I wanted to pacify her.'

'It was magnificent of you!' I said. 'There's not another woman in London who would have done it. I shall never forget it!'

I opened the street door. We stepped out on the pavement together. The carriage was waiting. Pale vaporous lights were shining over the square; columns of half-luminous mists gathering in the west were preparing to receive the setting sun. The sky was full of solemn majesty.

'I never,' I repeated, 'never knew a woman could be so generous. Forgive her if you can, and for heaven's sake don't tell Lawrence!'

'You can trust me,' she answered. 'Poor thing, she's suffering from an illusion not uncommon to

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my unhappy sex! I'm sorry for her. But one word of advice, Mr. Strood. Don't let her—pardon me for putting it bluntly!—but don't let her make a fool of herself again!'

With this she stepped into the carriage.

'I'll try,' I said. What else could I say?

Then she drove away.

My wife received me with anything but a repentant face. 'At last that young woman knows what I think of her!' she exclaimed.

But the time had come for me to assert myself. I did it with as much resolution as I could summon, but with misgivings as to the effect.

'Sophia,' I said severely, 'as my wife you have every claim on my indulgence, protection, and respect; but in insulting Miss Darley in your own house, it is my duty to tell you that you have committed a breach of decorum which I cannot easily forget!'

For the moment she was taken aback, but promptly recovering, retorted with a spirit which won my reluctant admiration:

'Don't talk nonsense to me because you're afraid of her, John! You know as well as I do that what I told her was perfectly true! When you married me, either you were in love with Charis Darley (and pretended you were not), or else she was in love with you, as you have led me to believe. In either case you have behaved abominably! Now they have made you resign, there's nothing to be got out of toadying Mr. Rivers and his lady-loves!'

'Sophia,' I replied, 'this discussion is both painful and hopeless; so, if you please, we will make it brief. The sentiments you express ill become

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a woman of your experience. Still, there is one reason for overlooking them. They were uttered out of affection for me! I will now leave you to reflect over what I have said. When we meet at dinner, I trust we shall both be better able to make greater allowances for the other!'

With that I left the room, pursued, I regret to say, by angry protests.

At dinner that evening we scarcely spoke. Sophia, I suspected, after thinking the matter out, discovered some of the flaws in her aggressive attitude to which I had drawn her attention, although, of course, I was far too generous to expect her to admit that she had made a fool of herself—a fact to which all sound argument pointed!

Fortunately the evening brought us a surprise in the shape of a card from Miss Leigh requesting our presence 'on the occasion of her niece's marriage to Mr. Lawrence Rivers.' By the same post there came a charming letter from Lawrence. Modesty forbids that I should here repeat the kind things he said, although I read them to Sophia with some pride.

How could I bear rancour against such a man? With practically the whole of polite society to choose from, he assured me that it was only the fact that I myself was married that prevented him from begging me to be his 'best man,' and that he hoped I would nevertheless afford him all the support in my power! I was touched and flattered by a message which plainly said, 'Remember, John, that after all I am your friend!'

Under these generous overtures Sophia also unstiffened.

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In the genial moment following reconciliation I confided in her a secret which hitherto discretion had withheld.

I told her of my ambition—how I had begun to write a life of Lawrence Rivers, and of the valuable material already collected. Commercially, I assured her, such a work would some day be of extreme value.'

'Remember Boswell!' said I, 'and Boswell's fame!'

In spite of her respect for literature Sophia had not read Macaulay's unjust attack on the prince of biographers, whose methods I have followed so far as the altered conditions of our time and my greater integrity of purpose permit.

Of my literary scheme my wife expressed a modified approval. She now knew, she said, that I did something else besides read nasty French novels when I shut myself up in the study! Such a work as mine, she moreover believed, would be useful to the world, since it would show how little men supposed to be great differed from those known to be small.

'When women come in you are all the same, John,' she added. 'Mr. Rivers and his lady-loves will interest the next generation quite as much as the quarrel over Carlyle (whose books I could never read) interested ours.'

'It 's my intention to tell the truth at all risks, Sophia,' I replied.

'Then I wouldn't give much for the character of the two women who 've been fighting for the man!' said my wife.

Thus a most unfortunate misunderstanding was

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followed by a pleasing reconciliation. To ratify it I took Sophia to the theatre and afterwards to sup at a fashionable restaurant.

For the man who seeks a remedy for 'lovers' quarrels' (if I may apply a phrase so light to the regretted dissensions with my wife), the healing processes are always at hand. Thus a day of unkindly confusion ended in an evening of domestic peace.

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CHAPTER XXXI

LAWRENCE RIVERS was married in March, and the world gushed about it. I have every reason to believe that he considered his second and mature crop of rapture a satisfactory harvest; but I had seen Diana Leighton's spell working in his undergraduate days and wondered at it, but now, although readmitted to his favour, I was denied opportunities for observation. It may be that he avoided speaking to me of his marriage to spare my feelings. There was, moreover, another reason for his reticence. The bride's will had to be considered, as well as the peculiar temper of my own dear wife. The unlucky outbreak of temper on Sophia's part had created a coolness between the two ladies which discouraged any candid exchange of views. Of course we were present at the wedding (Sophia looked imposing in dark green velvet), but the bride spread about her for our benefit an atmosphere of amiable derision which neither of us could breathe with comfort.

'When the new bride comes in at the door,' I murmured to Sophia, 'the old friends fly out at the window.' My wife approved of the phrase, which she described as 'witty and original.' 'I 've no patience with the young woman,' said she, 'with her airs and graces. You would think to look at her that no one

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was ever married before. She had the impertinence just now, John, to compliment me on your "middle-class discretion."'

'You should have told her, my dear,' I replied, 'that it was the stuff on which the British Empire has been built up.'

But if the bride's disrespectful irony provoked an attitude of impartial criticism in us, it called forth admiration in others. 'Brilliancy' was their word for it. Already I dreaded lest she would be known as 'the brilliant Mrs. Rivers.' Poor Lawrence, who loathed phrases! Nothing would cause me greater annoyance than to hear Mrs. Strood described as 'brilliant,' for which, I am thankful to say, her levity has given no excuse.

However, Sophia and I, as she remarked modestly at the time, were only 'two old-fashioned ciphers' who didn't count. We couldn't, she said, expect our friends to marry to please us. There was society to be considered.

From this point of view we both agreed that the marriage seemed a complete success. In the wider world where Rivers's future was being watched with increased interest, greater things began to be expected. If his management of the League had lost him the confidence of the classes whom my 'middle-class discretion' was supposed to represent, it had made him popular in circles which I may without disloyalty describe as 'Court.' 'Lawrence,' I heard Miss Darley say just before her marriage, 'is an aristocrat, and the world expects him to act as one!'

Now I was a sound Liberal! That was why she always feared my influence.

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So Lawrence was married, and disappeared from my sight, though not from my thoughts, for six long months. Before they returned, Japan had seen them, the Far East, and the fragrant wonders of the tropics. It was reported in an evening paper that Mrs. Rivers was busy on a book entitled *Paradox in the Pacific*, a rumour for which I am thankful to say there was no foundation.

When at last the wanderers returned home, although many things had happened, my determination to write Rivers's biography had only become stronger. I had already reached what the critic of the future will probably call 'the end of the first period' in both our lives. It now only remained for me to consider the changes which the insidious influence of marriage, that spares no natures, had inflicted on Lawrence's. Would the amazon tame the hero or the hero subdue the amazon? No man knows better than myself that wedlock is a conflict of wills. What, in the Rivers *ménage*, would be the resultant of these forces? That was the problem to which I was proposing to devote all my powers of penetration when it was my misfortune to cause him unjustifiable offence. By some strange obliquity of vision one man never quite knows what another will take as a compliment. I had wished to do honour to Lawrence whilst he was on his wedding tour—to prepare the public for his return, but it seems that I only succeeded in irritating his wife.

This is how the thing occurred.

Some time before Rivers married I was informed that Bilge and Co., the famous popular publishers, intended to issue a work under the title of *Youthful Promise in Eminent Living Men*, and I had

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'approached them,' as the phrase is, with the view of collaborating. The editor, Firkin Graham, in reply had invited me to contribute. My long and honourable association with Lawrence Rivers must, he said, have acquainted me with facts in my friend's career which it should be both my privilege and duty to give to the world. He further suggested that the time was now ripe for a sympathetic account of the part Rivers had played in the Finck agitation.

This story, of course, I had already written in my biography, and it only remained for me to obtain Rivers's permission to thus honour his juvenile energy. He was, however, ploughing the seas somewhere between Japan and California. I decided, therefore, that it was unnecessary to obtain his sanction, since I could not help feeling that his reputation was safer in my hands than in his own. Before finally accepting this honourable and lucrative commission, however, I consulted Sophia. Did she think I was justified in adding an interesting and important chapter to the history of our time? Sir Louis Finck had been dead for several years, so there were no risks of libelling him; moreover, the conduct of Lawrence Rivers throughout (but for a few innocent manifestations of eccentricity) had been greatly to his credit. Should I or should I not write it?

'What do Bilge and Co. offer?' asked Sophia, always a woman of business.

I mentioned the amount.

'Then write it at once!' she exclaimed. 'I had no idea gossip could be so costly.'

This is how that remarkable contribution entitled 'An Illustrious Undergraduate and an Ungrateful

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University' appeared in Bilge's excellent publication, which had a well-merited success with the public, although unfairly reviewed by the press and guyed in a would-be comic paper as 'The Love-Affairs of Mighty Men.'

For some reason or other Rivers was displeased. He cabled to me from San Francisco (where he saw a sensational account of the article in an American paper), 'Next time you are bent on making me look a fool, kindly ask leave.'

I was not, therefore, quite unprepared to find a certain coldness in his manner towards me after his return.

But although Rivers did not invite me to Beckstone, and I was in consequence debarred the satisfaction of studying as a husband a man whom I had observed as a lover, he nevertheless saw me at his club, where I will say that, in spite of his unreasonable annoyance, he treated me with the consideration due to our long acquaintance. For my literary attainments he had the utmost contempt. Men who have succeeded in verse not infrequently despise those who please the popular taste in prose. For this, therefore, I could easily forgive him. But although he had every right (as a superfine critic) to object to my style, he had no excuse for regarding what was written in a most flattering not to say fulsome vein as a piece of offensive vulgarity, excusable only on the grounds that it was well-intentioned.

Naturally I protested.

'I regret exceedingly,' I said, 'that you dislike my essay. It is personal, no doubt. It had to be. It is biographical.'

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'Biographical indeed! Why, it's bad enough to make a modest man blush in the dark! How do you think it pleases my wife to read of me in a beastly book devoted to the vanities of lucky grocers and successful members of Parliament as a love-sick undergraduate with "an eye like a hawk" and "a port like Mars," and all the rest of it?'

Ah! How did it please his wife?

That was the question! The anger was not Lawrence's, the offended vanity was not Lawrence's, it was all the reflection of the lady's rage.

But it was not for me to tell him this. When once a man has married a woman she becomes sacred to his friends. Not only must the virtue of Cæsar's wife be above suspicion, her tricks of temper and little meannesses must also be raised to the same pinnacle of flattering security.

Instead, therefore, of saying 'I forgive you for being annoyed by my article, because I know your annoyance is only the pale reflex of your wife's,' I tried to argue it out on philosophic lines.

I was writing history, I said, not concealing truth. The public had a right to know how great minds developed. The historian, who in this respect acts as a mere transmitter, has a duty to perform. Accuracy must never be sacrificed.

But Rivers refused to hear me.

'My good fellow, you made me look like a fool in a damned vulgar book because Bilge offered you a big sum for the wretched performance. They told me so! You insist truth mustn't be "sacrificed," so there it is for you!'

'What did Mrs. Rivers say about it?' I asked.

'Say!' he replied, 'that you ought to be kicked!

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Would you like to hear what Mrs. Leighton thinks too?'

I was not prepared for this, but said 'Yes!'

Then he took a letter from his pocket and read as follows: 'Of course John Strood's ridiculous article is in the worst possible taste and style. Fortunately your position is too firmly established to be damaged by it. I've read greater absurdities about Prime Ministers! Still, I think you might forgive him this time on the understanding that the offence is not repeated. Probably the poor fellow imagined you would be flattered. His reference to "the fair woman who at this time exerted so profound an influence on your character" is too ghastly for words!'

'There!' said Rivers, closing the letter, 'now you know what your friends think of your performance!'

What could I say? Diana Leighton's letter simply showed that the unhappy woman was still infatuated, and that she was consequently a witness whose evidence carried no weight! I could not tell him this. But here the matter, so far as Rivers was concerned, ended.

I had, however, a short interview with Mrs. Rivers of a still more unpleasant character. I gathered from it that she placed me reluctantly in the ranks of impudent and presumptuous impostors. I heard her submissively, as becomes a gentleman whose antagonist is a lady of high spirit and shrewd tongue with whom it is impossible to bandy words.

But what did she mean by 'presumptuous'? Did she suggest that I claimed a right to publish whatever I chose about her husband because I was his friend as well as her rejected lover?

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Unless this was her meaning, I can trace none in her attack. But remembering that an angry woman will say anything, I dismissed these painful thoughts from my mind.

And now I have reached the point in my story on which I look back with a heart full of unshed tears.

Against the machinations of a woman man has no safe shield.

I will endeavour to describe the wrong done me as briefly, calmly, and impartially as my wounded feelings permit.

I must say I was surprised at the persistency with which Mrs. Rivers sought my wife's society when, at the beginning of May, they came up to stay in Eaton Square, where Lawrence had taken a house for the season. Sophia, who could not afford a carriage, was constantly offered the convenience of her friend's! When I asked Sophia what the intimacy meant, she simply told me that Charis was a delightful woman whom we had much misjudged!

'I always told you so,' I replied.

'Of course she didn't like her husband being made a fool of in that thing you wrote about him,' Sophia resumed, 'but we couldn't expect that, and you were well paid for it as I told her!'

This remark struck me as somewhat artless, but I had implicit faith in Sophia, and suspected nothing behind these tactics but the renewal of a friendship interrupted by an outbreak of temper on my wife's part.

How ill-matched is man's credulity with woman's cunning!

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Yet I was warned! My stepmother warned me.

'You don't expect me to believe two women who hate one another as they do can be as thick as thieves for nothing!' she said bluntly.

But I remained blind and unsuspicious whilst Sophia's mind was being seduced, seeing only in this false friendship a reason for self-congratulation. I even went so far as to express this feeling to Lawrence, who looked odd, but said that it was 'gratifying.'

'Gratifying,' indeed!

I now know that I have the power to remain calm under the cruellest blow.

But to my wretched story!

At that time my papers were kept in two drawers in my study. That which contained the type-written copy of the manuscript entitled 'Biography of Lawrence Rivers' formed part of a desk once the property of the late professor's father. Of this the lock was broken. The drawer containing my own manuscript, however, was carefully locked after I had worked at the laborious task which I had undertaken for the highest of purposes.

One day after breakfast—a delightful morning of early summer—having lighted my pipe, in studious mood I went to the drawer with the object of making certain extracts from the typed copy to add to an anonymous article which I was writing for a Nonconformist review strongly opposed to Rivers's policy as president of the League.

The title which I had chosen for my contribution was 'Causes of the Failure of the Civic League,' and I was much interested in my work.

Suspecting nothing, I sought the carefully edited

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typed copy of the finished portion of my work in its familiar place. To my astonishment I found it gone.

I rang the bell and questioned the servant.

At first she could throw no light on it, but on being pressed suggested that Mrs. Strood might have lent it to Mrs. Rivers, who had called yesterday after dinner!

Of this visit I, poor innocent, who had been at the club, had heard nothing!

'What makes you think Mrs. Strood lent it to Mrs. Rivers?' I asked, struggling against a panic.

Because the maid had seen Mrs. Rivers carry away something which might have been it!

There was nothing for me to do but await the return of my wife, who was shopping in Westbourne Grove. At last I heard the click of her key in the door. Standing in the study I called to her in the hall.

'Sophia, come here!'

'What's the matter now?' she asked coolly.

'Sophia, where is my manuscript?'

'Oh, that thing? I lent it to Mrs. Rivers, who was curious to see it.'

Then you are a wicked, deceitful, treacherous woman!' I said, swept by a rush of righteous indignation.

'How dare you?' she retorted, quite unabashed.

'Woman!' I said, 'you have been seduced from your duty to me, and have committed an act indistinguishable from a theft! Restore that manuscript to me at once!'

'It's too late! I sold it to Charis Rivers for two hundred pounds—much more than you were likely

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ever to be paid for it. She and I talked it over, and came to the conclusion it wasn't safe in your hands. I hope she won't show it to her husband, but she said it didn't much matter whether he saw it or not, because nothing you could write now would greatly astonish him.'

Then she 'swept from the room,' as the novelists say, and in my rage I followed her to the drawing-room, pursuing her up the stairs with reproaches.

'They say you bullied your last husband,' I cried, in a burst of candid wrath, 'but I'm damned if you shall bully me! I shall bring an action against that woman. I'll raise a scandal that will make her hair stand on end!'

To what excesses of speech swift anger may hurry the mildest of us! The respect which I hold for my wife forbids me from repeating here her still more unbridled reply. Whilst, however, the dispute was at its height, and the drawing-room full of our clamours, the door opened and the servant announced 'Mrs. Rivers!'

'Tell her what you've just been saying to me!' cried the enraged Sophia, pointing to our visitor. 'Tell her, if you dare!'

At this I turned to Charis Rivers and said:

'Madam! return my manuscript!'

'Too late!' she replied. 'I showed it to Lawrence. We burned it this morning. He told me to tell you that, for your own sake, it was the best he could do for you! You couldn't, he said, publish it during his lifetime. If you survived him (which, Mr. Strood, I pray heaven you may not!), and printed it, you would ruin his reputation for ever. Your awful book, Mr. Strood, he said, bears the same

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relation to truth that the *Comic History of Rome* does to the *Life of the Cæsars*. He asked me, however, not to be angry with you. "The poor old fellow," he said, "can't help it!" The fact is, Lawrence had been expecting something of the sort!'

'There! now you've got the truth, John!' said my wife.

But, with eyes averted from my wife, I bent my frown on Mrs. Rivers.

'Madam!' I repeated, 'restore my manuscript!'

'Don't be silly, Mr. Strood!' she replied. 'We've bought it. If you wish to talk the matter over with Lawrence, go round and see him. He's quite interested in you! He says you are one of those characters which deteriorate with notoriety. As a clerk in a public office, he says, you would have discharged useful if mechanical duties, but as the satellite of a public man you are dangerous. He regrets that he was the means of changing you from the first to the last. He can't, however, be expected to let you write rubbish about him and publish it as a biography, although I believe the thing is common enough!'

But anger still burned within me.

'Madam!' I said for the third time, 'I will not quarrel with you, nor will I blame you for seducing my wife from her duty, nor further for turning the face of my friend against me by the means which you have learned only too well how to employ! But I will consult my solicitor, and in due course your husband shall hear from me. I have the honour of wishing you good-morning!'

With that I strode from the room, leaving the two

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